WESTERN Story Annual

25c • 1941
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Book-length Novels By

COBURN ★ DRAGO ★ FOSTER ★ FORMAN ★ FLYNN ★ PIERCE ★ SHORT

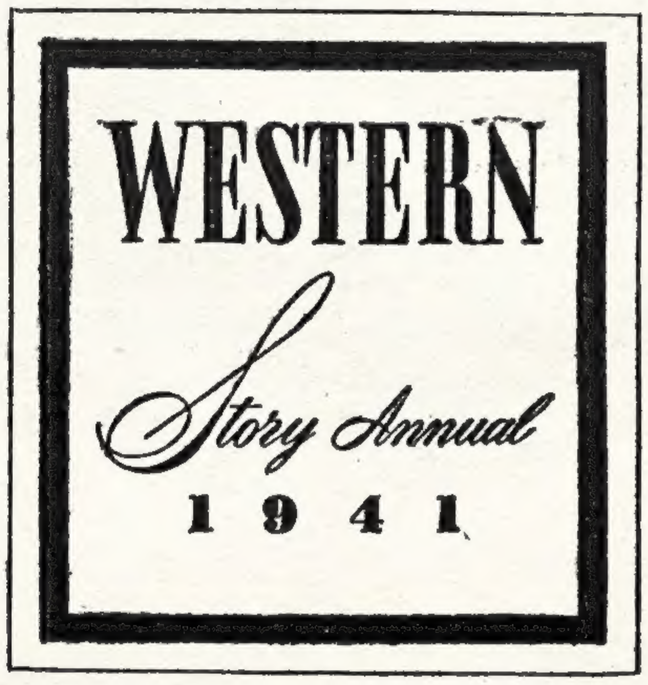
FOREWORD:

As a nation we are a venturous people. And, true to the traditions of our pioneer ancestry, there is one kind of adventure which never fails to hold a thrill for every red-blooded American—the matchless saga of our own West. With this in mind the editors of Street & Smith have compiled this Annual of Western stories for your enjoyment—a collection of outstanding yarns written by the top-ranking authors of current best-selling novels, serials and movie scripts.

Bennett Foster (whom *The New York Times* refers to as "a writer of superior Westerns") leads this imposing anthology with a gripping tale of the rodeo, TROUBLE-SHOOTIN' BUCKAROO. Harry Sinclair Drago, author of WIDE OPEN FOR A RUCKUS, is known as a star script writer on the lots of Hollywood, having written many stories for the late Tom Mix. Both Foster's and Drago's novels head the spring and autumn lists of Doubleday Doran & Company's famous Double D Westerns. Luke Short, represented in these pages with PAYOFF AT RAIN PEAK, ranks high with readers of rangeland lore, and his most recent serial, BLOOD ON THE MOON, was featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* and has been sold to RKO for a picture.

Perhaps the best-known name of all to Western fans is that of Walt Coburn, who gives you a thrilling tale of the old-time cattle drive, BRANDED ARROW POINTED NORTH. And L. L. Foreman whose Preacher Devlin stories have won him thousands of admiring followers has written CONTRABANDO—a story of the formidable Preacher himself.

These writers, as well as the others included in this noteworthy collection, are top hands all. You will find this Annual packed with thrilling excitement and it is representative of the kind of entertainment regularly found in the Street & Smith Western magazines—Western Story, Wild West Weekly and Western Adventures. These stories carry the brand recognized everywhere—the brand of the best in Western fiction.



STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN ★

★ ★ ★ *Story Annual*

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TROUBLE SHOOTIN' BUCKAROO

By Bennett Foster

Steve Hawn could bow-leg into more trouble than any ten cowpunchers riding straight at it—but he knew how to meet it when he found it!

I.

As always when he stepped into the lobby of the Bison Hotel, Steve Hawn got the feel of it again. The lobby was filled with people, rodeo hands, tourists, townspeople, all talking, all chattering until the steady hum was like a disturbed hive of bees. Around the lobby, over the desk and from the pillars that supported the second floor were hung the buffalo heads that gave the hotel its name.

On the broad leather divans, in the leather-covered chairs, on the deep-piled carpet that covered the floor, sat and stood Steve Hawn's fellows, the men and women who risked time and money, strong bodies and agile minds, to give the world a Western show. Steve Hawn, pausing just inside the revolving door, got the feel, and thrilled to it.

Pushing through the crowd toward the small room off the lobby that housed the rodeo committee, Steve was hailed and greeted by a dozen men and women. All the elite of the rodeo world was gathered in the Bison lobby, and, of the elite himself, Steve was known to and knew many. As he reached the door of the committee office, he stood aside. A little knot of contestants was issuing from the office, and Steve moved aside to let them pass. Two nodded and spoke to him, and a third, paus-

ing in the doorway, turned back to call some forgotten comment over his shoulder. Steve scowled at the third man, gray eyes crinkling at the corners, forehead under his black hair furrowing, deep creases forming at the corners of his mouth. He did not like Forrest Gerarden; had never liked the man.

Gerarden cleared the door, his eyes passing over and disregarding the man who waited, and Steve, still scowling, went into the office. He would wipe some of that disdain from Gerarden tomorrow, give Gerarden something to think about. Wait until the bronc riding came around. Gerarden wouldn't be so nonchalant when Steve Hawn took the day money.

Steve cleared the office door and stopped. Behind a desk, directly opposite the door, old Otto Irbach sat deep in a swivel chair. On a lounge beside the door were two men who eyed the newcomer impersonally. Hesitating just inside the door, Steve surveyed the office and its occupants. Irbach, lifting his eyes from a paper, saw him and pushed his pudgy body up out of the chair.

Time had aged Otto Irbach, made his pink cheeks sag and corrugated his neck with wrinkles, thinned his white hair and turned his eyebrows a bushy gray. But time had done nothing to his eyes. They were blue and twinkling just as they had been ten years ago when Otto Irbach promoted the first rodeo Buntlin had ever held.

"So?" The old man came across the office, hand outstretched. "You come back, nicht? You come back an' work for old Otto, Steve?"

Steve Hawn took the extended hand. The anger of the preceding moment was wiped away, and only gratefulness and a feeling of warmth remained.

"I came back, Mr. Irbach," he answered.

Putting his hand under Steve's elbow, Irbach turned him toward the men on the couch. "An' now you meet some friends of mine," he announced. "John, this is Steve Hawn. Chris, you should meet Steve. Meet John de Kalb an' Chris Urquart, Steve. They are judges for the show."

Steve found himself shaking hands with two middle-aged, straight-backed men who surveyed him with level eyes. He was a little awed. Possessed of his own measure of fame, Steve Hawn was confronted by men with greater reputations than his own. Chris Urquart was a Ranger captain from Texas, famed throughout the West. John de Kalb, deputy United States marshal, had a reputation that extended from Montana to Mexico.

"Pleased to meet yuh," Steve said, abashed.

De Kalb murmured some pleasantry. Urquart said nothing. Otto Irbach, his hand still thrust beneath Steve's elbow, turned the young rider toward the desk.

"An' now," Irbach announced, "you come an' sit down an' tell me why you don't come to Buntlin last year. An' what you have been doing."

Steve sat down beside the desk. De Kalb and Urquart, saying "good-by" to Otto, went out the door and Steve was left alone with the white-haired presiding genius of the Buntlin Rodeo.

"Tell me!" Irbach commanded.

"Ben got hurt," Steve explained. "We've bought a little ranch, Ben an' me, an' when he got his leg broke I stayed an' looked after the ranch."

Irbach nodded. "So?" he said. "An' how is Ben?"

"All right now. His leg's healed an' he's here."

"An' Jessie?"

Steve surveyed Irbach's bright blue eyes. "Ben's goin' to be a papa," he answered. "Jessie's here with him."

Irbach's eyes twinkled. "I have been looking over the entry blanks," he said. "I saw your name an' Ben Oldham's, but I didn't see Jessie's. So that's why?"

"That's why," Steve said. Somehow it seemed good to be talking to Otto Irbach again. Ten years ago, just a button of a kid, Steve Hawn had ridden steers for old Otto in Buntlin's first show. Sitting here beside Otto's desk he felt at home again.

"I'll see Jessie an' Ben," Irbach stated. "It will be good to see them again." He paused a moment then and surveyed Steve with twinkling blue eyes. "What do you think of my judges?" he demanded suddenly.

Steve paused before answering. Then: "Why, they're fine," he said. "I've heard of both of them, of course. But—"

"Last year"—Irbach did not wait for Steve to finish—"we had trouble with the judges. You weren't here so you don't know, but the contestants were very bad. They ran the show. They told the judges what to do an' what was right an' what was wrong. They bullied them. This year will be different. Nobody bullies Chris Urquart an' John de Kalb, I bet you!"

Steve laughed at the idea, and Irbach laughed, too. "An' this year," he continued, when the laughter was done, "we will be strict. No foolishness. If a man breaks a rule, he is disqualified from all events, an' loses his entry fee. You be careful, Steve!"

Again Steve laughed. "I'll be careful," he promised. "I'll try not to be disqualified. I haven't contested for eight months, so maybe I'm rusty."

It was Irbach's turn to laugh. Steve Hawn, who had once been world's champion cowboy, claiming that he might be rusty. It was a good joke.

"You're a good boy to come an' see old Otto," Irbach said. "Now you go on. I'll see Jessie an' Ben tonight or in the mornin'. Have a good time, Steve."

So dismissed, Steve got up grinning. Again he shook hands with the white-haired man who had started him in his career. "I'll tell Jessie an' Ben to expect you," he said at the door. "I'll see you tomorrow in the arena."

Going on out of the office into the crowded lobby once more, Steve paused. His right hand, deep in the pocket of his riding breeches, fingered the little roll of bills. He ought, by rights, to get the supplies Jessie wanted and take them out to the camp ground. But surely there was time to renew old acquaintanceships and talk a little. Across the lobby, at the entrance to the bar, Ed Toberry was talking to Al Merchant and Sam Hammers, and Dolly Bent and her husband, trick ropers, were sitting on a settee just a few feet away from Toberry. Steve Hawn started across the lobby toward them.

He had gone perhaps ten feet when he stopped. Forrest Gerarden was standing beside a pillar, talking to a girl whose back was turned.

As Steve stopped, the girl moved her head and coolly disdainful blue eyes met his own. Steve flushed, hesitated a moment and then went on toward her.

"How are you, Burley?" he asked, extending his hand.

Burley Dublin did not seem to see the proffered hand. She gave her red head a small, petulant toss, and her eyes were not kind.

"Why the sudden interest?" she asked coolly. "You've had eight months to find out how dad and I have been getting along. Or don't they sell postage stamps in your country?"

Steve did not answer. As always when he was in Burley Dublin's presence, something came into his throat and choked him. Gerarden's black eyes, scornful and arrogant, were on Steve's.

"Hello, Hawn," he said nonchalantly. "Somebody said that you were comin'."

"Nice of you to take an interest," Steve replied. He looked at the girl. "I'd like to talk to you if you've got time, Burley. I—"

"I haven't time." Burley cut the words short. "Forrest and I are meeting dad for supper. So long, Steve. I'll see you around, I suppose?"

Steve did not realize that he was being punished. He did not know that he was being penalized for eight months of silence. Hot color flooded his face.

"You'll have to look close if you do," he answered.

"I'll try to make up for your not being present," promised Gerarden. "Phil's at the elevator, Burley." Possessively he thrust his hand under her elbow. They moved on and Burley's voice came, clear and distinct, to Steve.

"You run into the queerest people," she said. "I suppose the committee has to accept every entrant, no matter who he is."

Gerarden's deep laugh added to the mounting color on Steve's face. Turning, he stalked across the lobby, brushing through the groups of chatting people.

When he reached the farther side of the lobby, Steve's anger had cooled somewhat. He was civil to Dolly Bent and her husband, Par, when they stopped him to ask concerning Ben and Jessie Oldham. They let him go presently, and he stalked on to join Toberry, Merchant and Hammers beside the barroom door. Toberry and Hammers shook hands with him. Merchant, rusty-haired, as tall as Steve, and gray-eyed, seized Steve's hand and pump-handled it.

"I didn't know if you'd make it or not," Merchant said. "When I grublined with you last winter, Ben said that you were through with shows."

"We needed the money," Steve said curtly. "If you fellows want a drink, I'll buy one."

There was a black mood upon Steve Hawn that the others sensed. Toberry announced that he was waiting for his partner, but Hammers, big, burly, square-bodied, grunted, "When did I ever say 'no'?" and Merchant, a little frown gathering on his face, agreed halfheartedly.

"I'll take just one with you," he announced reluctantly.

Like the lobby, the bar was crowded. Pushing up to the bar, Steve and his companions gave their orders. Merchant, putting down his empty glass, suggested that it was time for supper, but Hammers, rapping for attention, called to the bartender that it was his round.

"I've got to get back to Ben," Steve said. "Jessie wants some stuff. We're out at the Eagle Tail camp ground."

The bartender had obeyed Hammers' order and the glasses were filled again. Hammers, turning so that his back was to the bar, eyed Steve.

"Is Ben ridin'?" he asked.

Steve shook his head. "I'm all you got to worry about," he answered. "Ben's in the ropin' an' the two of us are entered in the team ropin'; but I'm ridin' an' bulldoggin' this year. Ben's leg won't stand it."

Hammers drank and put down his glass with a flourish. "Then I ain't goin' to worry too much," he said, grinning. "All I got to beat is you an' Gerarden. I can do that easy."

The words were said lightly enough, but they roused Steve. He eyed Hammers speculatively. "You'll be able to talk bigger when you got the day money in your pocket," he said curtly. "Want to bet?"

Hammers' eyes narrowed. "How about fifty bucks?" he retorted.

"It's a bet. You can hold stakes, Al." Steve fished the little roll of bills from his pocket.

Al Merchant's eyes were worried. Unlike his companions, Merchant was not a contestant. He was clowning the show. Al Merchant and Fancy Dan, his spotted mule, were known wherever rodeos were held, from Calgary clear to Madison Square Garden. Merchant worked on a straight salary, and he knew, because he had visited the OH—the little ranch belonging to Steve Hawn and Ben Old-

ham—how meager were the finances of the partnership. Unwillingly he accepted the money that Steve and Hammers held out.

"On the first day," Hammers said. "That's the bet, Hawn?"

"That's the bet," agreed Steve.

Hammers hesitated briefly and then spoke again. "Maybe you'd like a little action now," he challenged. "There's a game upstairs. How about it, Hawn?"

"You'd better come on an' have supper with me, Steve," Merchant interposed quickly. "We could pick up Jessie an' Ben. Seems like I owe you a meal after boardin' with you last winter."

Steve did not answer the invitation. He was meeting the challenge in Hammers' eyes, staring at the man. The two drinks were warming Steve, and

his mood had been set by his encounter with Burley Dublin in the lobby.

"I'll take you on, Sam," he drawled. "You don't shoot craps any better than you ride. Let's go."

Hammers answered that by turning to pay for the drinks. When his change had been given him, he shouldered his way toward the door. Steve and the anxious Merchant followed in his wake.

Upstairs, on the Bison's second floor, the trio walked down the carpeted hall. Hammers stopped, knocked on a door and answered the inquiry that followed the knock by speaking his name. The door opened a crack and then swung wide, and the three men went into the room.

Half a dozen men were already gathered. The bed had been pushed back and there was a blanket on the floor. The soft click of dice and the low-toned but impassioned plea of the shooter greeted their ears as Steve Hawn and his companions advanced to the blanket. Steve knelt down, noting that Bill Fox, a committeeman, was beside him. He nodded briefly to two other acquaintances, and watched the dice. There was money on the blanket and directly across from Steve a white-faced, smooth-handed man looked up and nodded curtly.

"You boys want in?" he asked.

"Hawn an' me do, Zillar," Hammers answered. "How's chances?"

"Wait for your turn at the dice," Zillar answered. "Shoot, friend; you're faded."

The man who held the dice shook them, rolled them out until they bounced against the wall, and then grunted disgustedly. "Craps!" he snapped, and stood up. Evidently he had enough.

The game went on. Presently, the dice passing in rotation, Steve received them. Peeling ten dollars from his little roll, he put it on the blanket and looked inquiringly at Hammers.

"How about it?" he asked.

Hammers placed ten dollars in front of him and Steve shot the dice. Eight was his point and on the second pass he made it.

"Twenty?" he challenged, watching Hammers.

"Twenty," Hammers agreed.

For six consecutive passes Steve held the dice. On the fifth pass he dragged as Hammers stood up disgustedly and spread his hands wide to show that he was broke.

"I'll be right here if you want a little more action, Sam," Steve crowed. "Get somebody to stake you, an' come back."

Hammers growled a curse. He was a surly loser. Steve paid no more attention to the man. The exhilaration of winning gripped him. He looked across the blanket at the white-faced Zillar.

"Shoot ten?" he challenged.

"Shoot!" Zillar answered impassively.

Steve shot, made a point, threw a seven and lost the dice. Bill Fox picked them up and warmed them in his hand.

"I'm in this for small change, myself," he stated. "I'll shoot a dollar."

The game went on. When Zillar took the dice Steve opposed him, fading Zillar's bets. Zillar was cautious. He did not let his winnings ride, but dragged down what he had won each time. When he in turn lost the dice and they passed on, Steve found that he had lost most of what he had won from Hammers.

Al Merchant leaned down and touched Steve's shoulder. "Let's go eat supper," he urged when Steve looked up.

"I'm just gettin' hot," Steve answered. "Wait till I get the dice again."

But when the dice came into his possession fortune had deserted Steve. Twice he shot craps, each time with ten dollars bet. Then he shot a point and lost the dice on the next pass.

"I notice how hot you are," Zillar taunted when the dice passed.

In turn Bill Fox and the next player lost the cubes and then Zillar had them. Eyes directly on Steve Hawn, he put down a bill. "How's for twenty bucks?" he asked casually.

"Shoot!" Steve ordered.

Zillar passed. He let the two bills remain in front of him. "Now you're loser," he announced. "I'll give you a chance, Hawn."

Steve covered the bet. When he had peeled off the bills there was just sixty dollars remaining in his roll, sixty dollars that was supposed to pay for food, for horse feed, for housing and incidentals. Lee Zillar shook the dice, rolled them and they stopped with a five and six showing.

"How about it, Hawn?" he asked.

Steve wet dry lips with the tip of his tongue and nodded. "I've got sixty bucks left," he said. "Drag twenty, Zillar."

Zillar picked up one bill. Steve put down the thin sheef he held in his hot hand. Again the dice clicked, rolled out and bounced gently from the mopboard.

"An' seven," Zillar announced. "Are you done?"

Steve Hawn got up. His eyes were fixed upon the dice. "I'm done," he said slowly, "but I'd like to look at those dice, Zillar."

The gambler's white face flushed faintly. "Meanin' that they're crooked?" he snapped.

"Meanin' that I'd like to look at them."

Zillar reached out his hand and picked up the dice. He straightened, rising from where he had kneeled, his hand dropping as he arose. "Look then," he ordered, and held out his opened hand.

Steve did not touch the dice. He stared at them and then lifted his eyes to Zillar's face. "I'd like to look at the dice that you were shootin'," he said quietly. "Not these. You switched them."

Zillar took a step back. His hand went up to his vest pocket and his lips snarled. "That's a damned lie. You—"

Before the gambler's hand could leave the pocket, Steve moved. One brawny hand clamped on Zillar's wrist. The other, clenched, snapped up in a blow. Zillar's head rocked back and blood appeared on his lips where they were cut by his teeth. Steve released him, his fist cocked and ready for another blow as Bill Fox and Al Merchant seized him.

"That'll be all, Hawn!" Fox said angrily. "I know Mr. Zillar. You're crazy. You can't start a fight here!"

"No man can call me a cheat and get away with it," Zillar growled. "If you can't take a lickin', Hawn, take your money and get out. Go on an' take it!"

Steve flushed. That was a taunt that Zillar had spoken, an intimation that he, Steve Hawn, could not take a whipping, that he was a poor sport and a poor loser. He shook himself free from the hands that held him, and, face suffused with color, turned and made toward the door. Merchant followed him out, but Fox, Hammers and the others remained. The door banged shut behind Steve and Merchant. Fox spoke.

"He's a damned poor sport. If I had my way I'd kick him out of the show. Come on. It's supper time. I'll buy a drink before we eat."

"I'll have to clean up a little first," Zillar said. "We'll meet you in the lobby, won't we, Sam?"

Sam Hammers grunted by way of reply. Fox and the other players went on out. When they were gone, Zillar moved to the washbasin. "Damn him," the gambler growled, examining his cut lip in the mirror. "I'll get him for that. If I'd got my derringer before he grabbed me I'd have—"

Hammers lounged on the bed. "He'll be got," he drawled. "It's a good thing he didn't make 'em search you, though. Them dice show in the cuff of your pants, an' they'd have found your gun."

Zillar snarled a curse and, bending, lifted two dice from his trousers cuff and put them in his pocket.

"An' I'll take my cut of what you won," Hammers drawled. "I brought Hawn in here, didn't I?"

"You'll take a cut of nothin'," Zillar snapped. "I know what you an' Gerarden are up to with Gault. I'll keep still about that an' that's all the cut you'll get from me, Sam."

Hammers hoisted himself up from the bed. "Some day, Lee," he said cheerfully, "you'll shoot off your head about what you know an' what you don't know, an' when that happens you'll quit shootin' off your head—for good!"

II.

The parade was at noon. All Buntlin thronged the sidewalks. Townspeople and tourists, eager seekers after excitement, lined the streets, and between those upturned faces the contestants rode, each dressed in his finery, horses groomed until they glistened, silk and felt, leather and metal, bright and glistening in the June sun.

Steve Hawn, riding So Big, with Ben Oldham beside him astride a bright bay gelding, felt like a dog. Not all the excitement, not all the yelling and the cheering that welled up about him, could down his feeling of despondency. Automatically he restrained So Big's excitement and gave to the curvetting of the horse. Automatically he swept his big white hat from his head and held it aloft in a gloved hand. His eyes did not see the crowd and his ears did not hear the yelling. He was thinking about Ben and Jessie Oldham, and the scurvy trick he had played them.

Neither Ben, small and wiry, nor Jessie, softly lovely and with the light of expectancy in her eyes, had chided Steve when he returned to the camp-

ground and blurted out his story. They had taken it without a word.

When the recital was done, Ben had limped over to his old grip and brought out an envelope and, opening it, extracted a thin sheaf of money. Steve knew what that money was for. It was for Jessie's hospital bill and the doctor when the baby came. Peeling off a few bills, Ben held them out to Steve. "You'll need a little cash," was all he said. He would have felt better, Steve thought, if Ben had berated him, told him that he was a damned fool, and rowed at him. But Ben had not. Neither had Jessie. They had simply accepted the fact that Steve had lost the bank roll. They were partners. If Steve gambled, so, too, did Ben and Jessie.

Steve, of course, had not accepted the money Ben proffered, and after a little argument Ben had picked up his hat and limped out, headed for the camp store and its supply of groceries. Riding in the parade down Buntlin's streets, Steve could remember all the details of the previous day. Remembering didn't buoy his spirits any.

When the parade was over, the contestants scattered. At two o'clock they would be at the arena, ready for the show. Steve changed into working clothes, but he had no appetite for any of the dinner that Jessie had prepared. Steve made a pretense of eating and when the meal was finished he and Ben went to the grounds.

The barns were behind the arena to the north. In front of them were the chutes and the judges' stand, and beyond these the track, the arena proper, and the grandstand. At the barns the contestants went about their various tasks, saddling, checking gear for the various contests, or for the stunts that they would perform.

Al Merchant came by, dressed in tattered tramp's clothing, red false beard on his face, nose enlarged with putty, a patch over one eye, and leading Fancy Dan. He stopped and exchanged a word or two with Steve before he passed on. Dolly Bent, glittering in her finery, rode back and forth on Buster, her mount for the trick riding, working out the kinks by doing a hand stand on the saddle. Ed Toberry coiled a rope and fastened it in place, coiled and tied another rope for his second loop, should it be necessary. Ben Oldham came limping back from the judges' stand, his heavy batwing chaps flapping.

"How's it goin', Steve?" he asked.

"All right," Steve answered curtly.

Ben stood by, his face unreadable. He knew what was bothering his partner, but he did not know how to correct it. To divert Steve, he made small talk. "Dublin's furnishin' some of the stock for the show," he drawled. "George Gault is furnishin' the rest. I was talkin' to some of the boys an' they say that Dublin's kind of hard up. He lost some horses last year from sleepin' sickness, an' he had to buy a bunch. The boys say he's tryin' to get a three-year contract to furnish the stock for the show."

Steve made no comment. He pulled the cinch tight on So Big, rocked the saddle to set it, and took his spurs from the saddlehorn.

"Burley's ridin' her daddy's string in the women's relay," Ben continued. "She's entered in the women's buckin', too. Well, here we go."

Already the arena manager was shouting for the riders to mount. It was time for the entry. From the judges' stand and in the grandstand the loudspeakers were blaring as Jack Sharp, the announcer, heralded the beginning of the show. Steve tucked the toe of his left boot into the stirrup and swung up on So Big.

Riding around the track, watching his companions, looking at the grandstand, surveying the timers, the field judges, all the pomp and paraphernalia of the rodeo, Steve forgot momentarily the thing that gnawed at his mind. When the parade broke up and Al Merchant was rolling his barrel out into the arena, he laughed, as he always did, at Fancy Dan's trick of kicking the barrel back at his master. Al Merchant, the barrel, and Fancy Dan were insurance. Let a steer get away, let one of the Brahmas turn and try to gore a rider he had thrown, and Al would be on the job. Active as a matador, Al would lure the maddened animal away by waving his red powder flag and, perhaps, save a man's life. Being a clown wasn't just being funny. A rodeo clown had to be able to do anything that the contestants did, do it better, and do it so that it seemed funny.

The show started. Men came out of the chutes on the backs of pitching, twisting Brahmas, clinging to a surcingle with one hand, riding as best they could. Some were thrown. Once Al Merchant interposed himself between a thrown rider and an angry steer, making a scrambling dive for the safety of his barrel when the Brahma charged, and rolling along the ground in the barrel under the thrust of the Brahma's horns. From the judges' stand Jack Sharp kept up a running fire of chatter and comment, the words blaring from the loud-speakers in the stands, bringing laughters and chuckles from the spectators. The steer riding finished, and the women's relay took the track.

Steve watched the relay with quickened interest. He saw the start, saw Burley's slim rounded body clothed in shining silk, as she bent low over her horse on the turns, saw her drop from the first mount, change saddle and swing up on her second horse. The horse started with a grinding of feet, slipped and almost went down. It recovered, but lost distance hopelessly. Burley was out of it.

Steve turned away, a little sick inside. That could have been bad had the horse fallen. Mighty bad. Another rider, coming behind Burley could have charged over her. He turned again. The race

was over. Sharp was announcing the winner and the time. The contestants were leading their last horses from the track. Burley's silks were mud-spattered. Steve scowled. Somebody had been careless when the track was sprinkled. There had been a puddle in front of Burley's second horse. That was the chance a rider took, of course. They had to get the breaks, and when the breaks were bad it was just tough, that was all.

In the calf roping Ben took second money, Forrest Gerarden beating his time by a fraction of a second. Ben's calf had dodged, almost spilling the loop. Still the time was mighty good, good enough so that Ben could figure in the aggregate time. That was something. Steve, with the rest of the boys behind the chutes, commented on the performance, calling sage and sometimes not-so-sage advice to the ropers as they went out to the calf pen.

The calf roping over, Sharp's voice blared from the loud-speakers in an announcement. Due to the lameness of her horse, Burley Dublin would not put on her high-school act at this time. Instead, the management was substituting a fancy roping exhibition in front of the stand. Steve had not heard that Burley's high-school horse, Lady, was lame. He wondered what had caused the lameness. It would be too bad if it was serious. Burley could not put on the act and so would not be paid, and Ben had said that Phil Dublin was hard up and needed money. Steve knew just how that worked and felt. He had been hard up, plenty hard up—not once, but many times—and it takes money to transport horses, to feed them and care for them. Pretty tough!

The fancy roping finished to a burst of applause, and Sharp announced the bucking. Steve hitched at his chaps and went to the chutes. This was one thing he was entered for, the bucking and the bulldogging. He had drawn Salty, one of Dublin's string of buckers, for his horse.

One by one, as each contestant was announced, men went out of the chutes on twisting, kicking, pitching, bawling tornadoes. Some were thrown, some made their ride and were picked up by the pickup men when the gun went off. Steve slipped a hand under the cinch that circled Salty's chest, felt that the saddle was secure, and climbed the chute. He lowered himself gingerly, found the stirrup, took up the grass rope that made the single rein, and nodded.

"Next rider out of Chute Two!" the announcer called. "Steve Hawn on Salty. Turn him loose!"

The gate opened and Salty jumped, hit and sucked back. Steve waved his hat in his free hand, held the rein clear to show that Salty had plenty of slack, and kicked with the spurs, three times in the shoulder, three times in the flank. Sit up there and balance. Make a ride. Watch Salty's withers and guess which way the next jump would come. Salty bucked, but there was no force in him. Steve had ridden the horse before, knew that he was a real bucker, knew that if a man made a ride on Salty he was in the money. Salty was a horse that the riders liked to draw. But Salty was not doing his stuff! His jumps lacked force; he wasn't working.

The gun went off, Steve kicked loose, felt the pickup rider's arm, and let himself go. Salty was clear and Steve dropped to the ground and landed on his feet amidst a sound of mild applause. It hadn't been much of a ride. Steve walked back to the chutes.

When he climbed the fence, Forrest Gerarden was out there on Tornado, whose performance was putting Salty's to shame. There was a burst of yelling and whistling when the gun went off.

"There goes the day money," Steve said, not looking at the man beside him.

Ben's voice was cheerful. "Mebbe not. I've got Rockin' Chair."

Steve whirled to face his partner. "You aren't entered!" he expostulated. "You can't ride the buckers, Ben. Your leg won't stand it!"

Ben grinned. "I figgered to pick up a little extra money," he answered cheerfully. "Rockin' Chair's in the chute now. Well, here we go."

Steve stood stock-still, unable to move. He knew why Ben had entered the bucking contest, knew where Ben had gotten the money for the entrance fee. It was because of him and his foolishness that Ben was limping toward the chutes. Ben looked back and grinned at his partner. Steve started toward him and then stopped. He couldn't keep Ben from riding, not now, not with the money up. He turned and made for the fence.

Rocking Chair came out on springs. He pitched away from the chutes, high and crooked, and Ben sat up there, making a ride. Steve let his breath go with relief. If this kept up, Ben was all right, sure of the day money, too. No horse bucked like Rocking Chair. Rocking Chair was Phil Dublin's ace, his hole card when it came to the bucking string. Five seconds more to go and—

Rocking Chair whirled and came down crooked, almost falling! Then, like a locoed horse, he quit bucking, lowered his head and charged for the chutes. Men scrambled away, getting clear. The horse struck the heavy post from which a chute gate hung, and went down all in a heap, Ben Oldham with him. Steve was off the fence and running. So were others. He heard a man say: "Broke his neck when he hit," and then he was kneeling beside his partner. Ben's eyes were open and his chest was rising and falling.

"Who?" Steve gasped. "Whose neck?"

"The horse," a voice answered.

They picked Ben up and carried him to the hospital tent. His eyes were still open, but they were

blank. Out in the arena Al Merchant was putting on an act with Fancy Dan, taking the customers' minds off the thing that had just happened and making them laugh. A doctor came and bent over Ben Oldham, examining him carefully. After a time he straightened.

"Concussion," he said gravely. "Possibly a fracture. We'll take him to the hospital for an X ray."

Steve turned. Jessie, white-faced, was standing beside him. Her eyes were wide. Steve heard a voice say: "Now, don't you, Jessie. Now don't you!" and realized that it was his own voice, that he was talking. Dolly Bent came up beside Jessie and put her arm around her. Someone pushed Steve's shoulder and he turned, suddenly angry. Ed Toberry stood behind him.

"They're wantin' the bulldoggers, Steve," Toberry said. "Come on. You can't do Ben no good. They're goin' to take him to the hospital."

"I'll go with him," Steve said, again not recognizing his own voice. "I can't—"

"You can't do him no good," Toberry grated. "You're entered. Come on. You need the money. I'll haze for you."

"You need the money." That was right. Ben had ridden that crazy horse because they needed the money. And why did they need the money? Because of Steve Hawn! Men were lifting Ben onto a stretcher. Jessie had gone. Steve turned and followed Ed out of the tent.

He mounted So Big without thinking at all about what he was doing. With Ed Toberry beside him, he rode through a gate into the arena. Down at the east end there was a steer in the pen. So Big circled and stopped behind the starting line. The horse was trained; hours and days had been spent in training him.

"Ready, Hawn?" someone called.

"Turn him loose," Steve said in a queer, strained voice.

A brindle steer lumbered past So Big and began to run. The steer crossed the deadline, So Big jumped and lit running. Ed Toberry was beside and a little back of the brindle steer, holding him in line. So Big, covering country, brought Steve alongside the brindle back. There was never a bulldogging horse like So Big, Steve thought mechanically. When they made him, they broke the mold. Steve kicked loose the stirrups, gathered himself, poised, leaped. The steer wavered a trifle, out of line.

Steve knew what was coming when the steer turned that small fraction. Bulldogging is an art. Time in bulldogging rests upon everything being done just right. And now this couldn't be just right. Ed was not used to hazing for Steve; Ben had always hazed for his partner. Always, just before Steve leaped, Ben put the steer a little closer, but Ed had let the steer swerve out.

Steve's hands hit slippery horns and he fought to grasp them. His sleeve went down on a horn, fouling there, catching. The button snapped and the sleeve was free. Steve wrenched and the steer's neck was strangely limber; it bent down sharply as Steve's weight came on it. Steve slid his feet under, came on down. One polished horn hit the earth, plowing in. The steer went up and over, turning in

a hoolihan because of the pegged horn. Steve heard something snap, felt the neck go still more limp, and then the brindle body, turning clear over him, crashed down. For a moment Steve lay on the ground. Then, slowly, he climbed to his feet and stood looking at the steer. The brindle neck was twisted at an unnatural angle. From the judges' stand Jack Sharp's voice boomed:

"No time! The contestant is disqualified. All right, folks. Turn your eyes to the track now. Here are the Indians, the folks you've been waiting for. All right, Sitting Bull, trot out your war dance!"

Over on the track the tom-toms of the Sioux began their rhythmic booming. Ed Toberry was coming back, leading So Big. A team of mules was approaching from the west end of the arena to drag off the brindle steer, and, from up beside the chutes, the two field judges, Chris Urquart and John de Kalb, were slowly riding.

"Why in hell did you want to peg him?" Toberry demanded angrily, handing Steve the reins. "Don't you know that disqualifies you? Don't you know that kicks you out of the whole show? You can't go into any contest now. Don't you know that?"

When Steve sensed what was wrong he knew the rodeo was loaded with dynamite!

III.

It seemed mighty queer to Steve Hawn to be sitting in the grandstand. Not for a long time had he seen a show from the spectators' side of the field. He felt strange and unfamiliar.

The fact that he had pegged his steer and turned a hoolihan with it, had put him out of the competition all right. Not only was he out, but his entrance fees were also forfeited. He had a little loose change to jingle in his pocket, and that was all. He had gone out to the hospital following the debacle in the arena, and told Jessie what had happened. She had looked at him with blank, unseeing eyes, as though she had not heard his announcement. Ben was still unconscious, and the X rays had not told whether or not he had suffered a fracture or simply a concussion. Steve had wanted to stay at the hospital, but the nurses seemed to think he was in the way, and Jessie had not noticed his presence. So Steve pulled out. All Buntlin was going to the rodeo and, naturally, he gravitated to the arena.

He had also visited Otto Irbach. Otto had been curt and a little cool. He was sorry for Steve. He sympathized with him concerning his tough luck, but did nothing about it. Nothing at all. Rules were rules and contestants were contestants first and friends afterward. Steve had been disqualified, and that was that! There was no appeal.

Somehow, talking to Otto Irbach, Steve got the idea that there was more to the coolness of his reception than the simple fact that he had disqualified himself. There was more behind Otto's curtness than the accident that had broken the brindle steer's neck. Steve could not figure it out. He had no way of knowing that Bill Fox had talked to Otto and told him about the scene in the room of the Bison Hotel, when Steve had demanded to see Zillar's dice.

Not only was Otto cool, but it seemed to Steve that the rest of the boys had a crow to pick with him. They stopped talking when he approached and broke up their little groups, each man going his own way. Steve was left pretty much alone. It hurt and bothered him, and would have worried him more had it not been for Ben. He blamed himself for what had happened to Ben, knew that it was his fault, and that—coupled with his concern for his partner—drove lesser considerations from his mind.

So, on the second day of Buntlin's rodeo, "The He-Coon of Western Shows," Steve Hawn sat in a seat in the grandstand and watched the performance. Below him, in a box down close to the track, Lee Zillar occupied a chair. Zillar was alone in the box, with no one else close to him. It seemed as though the gambler had rented the box for himself, wanting privacy even amidst the crowd. Steve had seen the gambler come in, had met his impassive, blank-faced stare, and then promptly forgot him. Lee Zillar, sitting down there alone, meant nothing more to Steve Hawn than any of the

thousands of others who were watching the performers in the arena and on the track.

As the show progressed, Steve gradually forgot his worries or, rather, forced them to the back of his mind. A technician himself, he watched and appreciated the technique of others. He knew just how hard it was for a man to sit balanced atop a bucking horse. He knew the hours of practice that went into the smooth, easy-appearing performance of the trick riders and ropers. He could feel the strain of muscle and the quick application of weight when the bulldogging took place; could time, just as the contestant timed, the exact fraction of a second when the loop must go in the calf roping. All the color, all the speed and excitement of the arena was a familiar thing to Steve Hawn, sitting there in the grandstand.

Gradually, as the show progressed, Steve noticed something odd out there in the arena. There seemed to be something not quite right about the performance. As he watched, he gradually came to understand what that something was. There occurred, in certain events, a sort of letdown, a kind of relaxation. Some of the buckers were hard to ride and gave the men who had drawn them a chance at the money; others weren't so good. For example, Salty put on a poor performance, so poor indeed, that the man who had drawn him was granted a reride. Again, some of the Brahmas were good and some seemed easy.

All the way along, Steve began to feel a difference in the stock that was used, and, analyzing that difference, he decided that Phil Dublin's stock was poor and that the other stock was not. It was odd. Only a trained man could have really analyzed the thing, but Steve was trained and the difference was there. Although the crowd could not know what was wrong, still it knew that something was amiss. And certainly, out in the arena, the men and women who were putting on the show could tell the difference.

The performance for the day concluded with a drill by a battery of artillery from Fort Marcy. Guns and limbers, men and horses, performed intricate, fascinating evolutions at high speed. At the end of the drill the guns unlimbered and fired salvos, and when the last crashing report was echoing, there came a faint popping from across the arena. Al Merchant had crawled out of his barrel and was fighting back at the artillery.

A tattered, apparently angry figure, crouched and pugnacious, he shot back at the cannon with an old .45 Colt. The crowd howled its glee, and Fancy Dan, trotting up in all his spotted glory, seized his master by the slack of his overalls and hauled him away, while Al struggled vainly to renew the combat with the cannon. Steve Hawn had to grin. It was a good stunt. He had helped Al Merchant train Fancy Dan to do just that thing back at the ranch.

Jack Sharp was booming announcements through the loud-speakers; the crowd was rising and filing out, and Steve, going with them, glanced down at Zillar's box once more. The gambler was leaning forward against the front rail of the box, apparently uninterested in what had happened or was happening. His back showed a sort of impassive indifference. Steve, after the brief glance, worked his way from his seat to the aisle, and so on to the exit.

At the hospital, just a block from the city hall and jail, Steve learned that Ben's condition had not changed. He did not get to see Jessie, who, the nurse informed him, was sleeping; nor did he get more than a glimpse into the room where Ben lay unconscious. There were flowers in the room and Steve was glad that someone had remembered Ben. Not that he could see the flowers, but Jessie could, and that would make her feel better.

Leaving the hospital, Steve wandered back toward Sheridan Street, Buntlin's principal thoroughfare. It was supper time. He stood on a corner fingering the few coins in his pocket. He had about two dollars left after paying for his seat at the rodeo. Supper was going to further deplete his finances, and when the two dollars was gone, he would be broke. It was a cheerless prospect. Recollection brightened it. There were some groceries out at the Eagle Tail camp, he remembered. He could cook his supper out there. And then he must make some arrangements about feed for So Big and for Ben's horse. With those things in mind, Steve started to walk north on Sheridan Street.

He had not gone more than a block when a man fell into step beside him, and another, coming from the left, tucked his hand under his elbow. Steve took a swift look at the men who had joined him, and stopped walking. They wore civilian clothing, with the customary Western style hat of the country, and they were big and bronzed; Steve knew the two men. They were of Buntlin's police force.

"Captain wants to see you, Hawn," the man on the right announced. "Down to the station."

"What for?" demanded Steve.

"He'll tell you," the policeman answered, and ran swift, deft hands over Steve, searching for a weapon. "Come on. You can ask him what he wants to see you about."

Bewildered, Steve turned and started back down the street between the two men.

The police station was downstairs in the basement of the city hall. Steve and his escort descended a flight of stairs, wheeled sharply to the right and entered an office. The burly man behind the desk was Cap Summers, Buntlin's chief of police. He looked up sharply.

"Where'd you find him?" he asked.

"Down on Sheridan Street," Steve's taller captor answered.

"What's this about, cap?" asked Steve.

"Sit down," Summers ordered.

Steve seated himself in a chair before the desk. Both of the officers who had accompanied him remained in the office, one lounging against the door, the other leaning on the wall beside the door.

"I still don't know what this is about," Steve repeated, resentment in his voice.

"You'll learn," Summers promised grimly. "Where were you this afternoon, Hawn?"

"At the rodeo."

Summers nodded. "Did you see a man named Zillar there?" he demanded.

"He had a box down in front of me," Steve answered, wondering where the questions were leading. "Why?"

"In front of you, huh?"

"Yes. Say, cap, I want to know—"

"I'll ask the questions! You had some trouble with Zillar yesterday, didn't you?" The question was shot as out of a gun.

Steve flushed a dull red in recollection. "If you call knockin' down a tinhorn gambler 'trouble,' I did," he said curtly. "He was shootin' crooked dice. I asked to see them an' he made a reach for his pocket. Naturally I hit him."

Summers' eyes bored into Steve Hawn's. "An' you lost your roll," he commented. "I've heard about it, Hawn. You were sore an' you were broke. Wasn't that so?"

"I was sore an' I was broke," Steve corroborated. "But what's that got to do with Zillar? I don't see—"

"You'll see in a minute," Summers promised. "I think you know already. Where'd you go after you left the rodeo?"

"To the hospital." Steve's temper was gone. Only by an effort did he restrain his anger. "Then I left there an' started out to the Eagle Tail camp to get some supper. I—"

He stopped short. Another officer, one in uniform this time, entered the office and bent above Summers, speaking softly into his ear. Summers nodded and said: "That checks." The officer stepped back and Summers' cold blue eyes met Steve's again.

"Zillar was shot this afternoon," Summers said harshly. "You know that, Hawn."

Steve's eyes were wide with astonishment. "Why—" he began.

"Never mind the lies," grated Summers. "We've been out to the camp ground an' your gun was found. You ought to have cleaned it instead of tryin' to hide it. Zillar was shot with a .32-20. Is this your gun?" As he spoke, the police chief reached out toward the uniformed officer, who placed a heavy single-action Colt in his hand. Steve recognized the gun. It was his. He closed his lips firmly.

"We know why you did it!" Summers snapped. "We know when, too. It was when the artillery was firing. We've got you, Hawn. Are you goin' to confess?"

"I've got nothin' to confess," Steve answered deliberately. "I didn't kill Lee Zillar an' I don't know who did."

"Don't lie!" Summers snarled, coming up out of his chair. "You'll make it a lot easier on yourself if you confess. Come on now, Hawn. You killed Zillar. Come on an' tell us!"

At nine o'clock they took Steve upstairs to the jail. He was white and weary, and there was a bruise high on his cheekbone. For three hours he had withstood a battery of questioning, of swift attack, of tricky inquiry. Once he had completely lost his temper and risen up to strike at Summers; hence the bruise on his cheek. Importunity, questioning, promises—he had withstood them all. They had shown him his gun, one chamber fired; they had confronted him with the statement of the woman who rented cabins at the Eagle Tail camp, and who swore that she had seen Steve Hawn go into his cabin shortly after the rodeo was over. They had battered at him with words until Steve hardly knew what question he was answering, and so had almost trapped himself. Finally they had given up. Steve sank down upon the cot in the cell into which he had been thrust, and put his head in his hands. He had never been so tired, so mentally fatigued. One fact and one fact only stood out in his mind. Zillar had been murdered and he, Steve Hawn, was accused of the crime.

Gradually, sitting there in the semidarkness of his cell, his mind cleared a trifle. He knew that he was innocent, knew that he had not killed Zillar. If he himself knew it, then someone else must also know it: the man or the men who had done this thing. And they were the men who had framed him, who

had planted the empty shell in his gun, or who had used the gun to do the killing. If he could only get out, if he could investigate, he might be able to prove his innocence. But he could not get out, could not investigate, and Summers and all of Buntlin's officers were convinced that they had the man who had killed Zillar. Steve Hawn was that man, according to their reasoning, and the facts they had. They were not going to do any more investigating. They were satisfied.

Steve had been alone in his cell for an hour when they came for him again. The same two officers who had picked him up on Sheridan Street appeared at the cell and unlocked it.

"Come on, Hawn," one ordered briefly.

Steve hoisted himself wearily from the cot. They were going to question him again, he thought, and steeled himself for the ordeal. He walked out into the corridor, and the man who had spoken gave another order: "Get your hat." Steve returned to the cell and picked up his Stetson. It was odd that he would need a hat just to go down into Summers' office.

Downstairs in the chief's office, Summers was still behind the desk. He surveyed Steve with hostile eyes. "You're goin' to the hospital, Hawn," he said. "Your pardner is askin' for you. The doc over there says you've got to come. They can't get Oldham quiet. Take him along, boys, an' watch out that he doesn't try anything."

One of the two officers reached out, looped a thin chain around Steve's thumb and twisted it tight. Buntlin's police were modern. They used these chain nippers instead of handcuffs.

"Come on, Hawn," the officer ordered.

Leaving the city hall, the three men walked to the corner, turned and went down the quieter side street. All about, people were celebrating. The rodeo was Buntlin's one big splurge, and the town made the most of it. Sheridan Street was filled with lights and noise as the town turned loose.

At the hospital, Steve and the officers stepped into an elevator and went up. The corridor they entered was quiet, white and sterile, devoid of any life save for the two floor nurses. The men went along the corridor to Ben Oldham's room. At the door the officer removed the nippers and again cautioned Steve. "Don't try anything, Hawn."

"I won't," Steve said bitterly, and entered Ben's room.

Jessie was sitting beside the bed. Relief showed on her face when Steve came across from the door. Ben's eyes were bright and hot with fever and his face was pale, pasty brown in the dim light.

"Steve," he muttered.

"I'm here, Ben," Steve said calmly.

Light of recognition grew in the hot brown eyes. "Good boy!" Ben's voice was so low that Steve was forced to bend down to hear the words. "You saw what happened?"

"I saw it, Ben," Steve assured. "He didn't throw you. The horse just went crazy, that was it."

"Didn't throw me," Ben muttered. "Don't feel bad, Steve. I was goin' to ride anyhow."

Steve looked questioningly at Jessie. For an instant she took her eyes from her husband's face and looked up at Steve. Somehow she managed a tremulous smile.

"Ben's been worried," she explained. "He thought you'd blame yourself for his getting hurt. You mustn't do that, Steve."

Something welled up into Steve Hawn's throat, something that choked him, causing his eyes to smart. What fine folks these two were, this partner of his and Jessie! Ben, sick as he was, had been worrying because he thought Steve might blame himself for the accident. Ben and Jessie Oldham! They were the kind that a man tied to, all his life.

"You're goin' to be all right, Ben," Steve assured, pushing back the thing that choked him. "He'll be all right, won't he, Jessie?"

Jessie's face brightened. "The doctor says there isn't any fracture," she answered, her voice strong. "He'll have to stay here a while. His leg is broken again, but he'll be all right, Steve."

"We'll get you out of here an' back home to the ranch," Steve said strongly. "You'll be O. K., Ben."

Ben's lips curved as he tried to smile. "Sure, I will," he murmured. "You'll win the bronc ridin' an' the bulldoggin' an' we'll be on Easy Street. Don't you worry, Steve, just because a locoed horse piled me up."

"That was it," Steve agreed eagerly. He knew how proud Ben was of his riding, knew that his partner would be comforted by the thought that Rocking Chair had not thrown him, but had simply gone crazy. "He acted like he was locoed. He acted like somebody'd given him a shot of dope."

Ben's eyes closed. His restless head remained quiet on the pillow, the bandage around it white as the pillow itself. "Good boy," he murmured. "Jessie an' me won't see you work, but we'll be rootin' for you."

"I got to go now, Ben," Steve said awkwardly. "I mustn't get you tired. You'll be all right, old son, you an' Jessie both."

Jessie's wan smile was the last thing he saw as he left the room.

Out in the corridor again, the taller officer replaced the chain nipper. Steve walked along beside his escort, not paying any attention to the corridor or the officers or the chain on his wrist. He was filled with gratitude and relief. Ben was going to be all right. He had a broken leg and a concussion, but he wasn't going to die. A weight lifted from Steve's broad shoulders.

The relief he felt almost made him forget his own predicament. Riding down in the elevator, he

thought about Ben, about Jessie and about the accident. Ben said that Rocking Chair had acted like he was locoed, like he had been given a shot of dope. Steve had ridden Rocking Chair himself, and knew that the horse was a vicious, wicked bucker. But Rocking Chair had always taken his bucking as a game, not as something that was life and death. It was certainly queer that the horse should have piled up that way, charging blindly into the chute. It was— Steve started slightly and the chain on his wrist bit in. Rocking Chair had gone crazy, and Salty hadn't bucked worth a cent. Now why was that?

They left the hospital and entered the quiet street, walking along it toward the corner. The man on Steve's left had fashioned a cigarette. He tried to light it and a puff of wind blew out the match. He stopped, selected another match and, striking it, cupped the flame in his hands and turned his back toward the wind. Steve and the other officer had also stopped. Steve shifted slightly, cocked his left fist and, without any warning whatever, brought it up in a short, hard blow that went home just on the angle of the jaw of the man who held him.

The officer went back a step. Steve seized the chain in his right hand, jerked, struck again, more a shove than a blow, and suddenly was free. He lunged ahead, heard a man behind him rap out an oath, and dodged sharply to the right. Behind him a gun bellowed, and a bullet, striking against the side of a building, whined away in a ricochet. Steve bent low, and, running as he had never run before, made for the dark mouth of the alley.

He reached the alley. Feet pounded behind him and voices called on him to halt. Steve went flying up the alley, not looking back. He kicked into something soft, heard a man grunt, staggered, regained his feet, and came to the back of the hospital. Behind him, in the alley, guns boomed and reverberated.

Steve turned sharply to the left into the ambulance drive behind the hospital, dodged past a lighted door and stopped. Crouching, he looked back.

His heart pounded and his breath rasped in his throat as he held himself motionless. The commotion in the alley grew and then decreased. He had stumbled over a man in the alley, some drunk resting there, flotsam from Buntlin's celebration. And the drunk, startled, had staggered up and run. Fortune had played into Steve Hawn's hands. For a moment he was free. For a moment the officers were distracted from him by an unwilling and unsuspecting decoy.

Silent as a shadow, Steve went on along the wall behind the hospital, keeping close to its shelter. At the end of the wall, on the quiet side street that paralleled Sheridan, he paused and looked out. The street was empty save for a little party of men who walked along the sidewalk, not too steadily, making for the corner. Boldly Steve stepped out and followed the revelers.

IV.

Steve Hawn thought rapidly as he walked. Before long the hue and cry would be out for him all over Buntlin. His cabin would be watched; so, too, would the hotels, the restaurants, the bars, the streets, every place and any place a man might go. There was one possible haven for the moment, and that was the rodeo grounds. No one would look there. The arena, the stands and the pavilion would not be a place where a fugitive would be expected to go. Accordingly, Steve determined to go there. He needed a little respite, needed a little time, and, too, Zillar had been killed at the rodeo and, perhaps, just perhaps, Steve might find something there that would give him a lead, some clue with which he could work out his own salvation. Staying on the side streets, making haste carefully, Steve went toward the rodeo grounds.

There was a watchman at the grounds, Steve knew. Too, there would be swipes and hangers-on at the barns. These, he believed, he could avoid. He found the grounds dark and silent. There was a lantern burning down by the pavilion, a light that moved jerkily as someone carried it. Steve skirted the stands and moved away from the light.

He was at the south end of the stands, well around them, when he heard voices and halted. A man said, "Well, good night, Henry," and another voice answered, "Good night."

Steve heard footsteps move away and then the solid thump of feet and the clink of metal. The watchman was coming, making his rounds. Steve hung close to the wall in the blackness and held his breath. The man went on past and Steve let his breath go again. As he moved forward, he wondered who it was that had spoken to the watchman.

A light burned over the door of the pavilion. Steve paused outside the light, watching it, debating as to whether to try to get to the pavilion across its circle. Then, suddenly, the light went out. Steve moved. He reached the door and saw a light moving along inside the building, following down the center alley. Steve stepped in. The light disappeared, only a feeble glow remaining. Cautiously, wondering what this was all about, Steve went down the center alley.

The light glowed to his left now. Over there, closely adjacent to the side entrance that gave passage to the chutes, close to where the bucking strings were stalled, the glow of the light stopped. On tiptoe, Steve went toward it. He heard a horse snort and fight against a halter, heard a man's voice speak soothingly, almost in a whisper: "Whoa! Whoa, now!" Then he saw a lantern burning on the floor. Steve stopped.

He could see the feet of the man beside the lantern, boots plain in the light. The boot tops were exposed, for their wearer had tucked his trousers into them. The boots intrigued Steve Hawn. They were fancy stitched and, even at that distance, he could discern the pattern as the wearer of the boots turned. A butterfly pattern decorated the boot tops, an unusual pattern, different from the ordinary stitching. Again the man spoke soothingly to a horse. "Whoa . . . whoa, Salty!"

Steve leaned forward, the better to see. He was at the end of a row of stalls. As he leaned out, his hand touched a pitchfork handle. The fork came clattering down. Instantly the boots disappeared from the light and only the lantern was left burning brightly in its circle. The faint noise of receding steps sounded along the stall alley, and then there was quiet. Steve waited, mentally cursing the misplaced fork. If the swipes around the pavil-

ion put things where they belonged, he would never have made that noise and he might have seen the man who carried the lantern. Too late to swear now. The man was gone.

He debated with himself as to his next move. He had seen something, seen someone fooling around the stock. He did not know who or why. What would be the best thing to do? Remembering his own predicament, Steve decided to get out of there. The rodeo grounds were not going to offer the haven he had thought. He backed cautiously along the side of the stall and stopped stock-still. Something hard was thrust into his back, and a quavering voice said, "Put up your hands!" It was a woman's voice. Slowly Steve lifted his hands.

"I've caught you," the voice said. "Walk out into the light. I've caught you!"

Deliberately Steve moved forward. The most dangerous person in the world is one that is frightened. There was no doubt in Steve's mind that the woman behind him was scared and that she had a gun. He was very careful not to alarm her. He walked out into the middle of the alley, turned slowly, and went toward the lantern. In the circle of light he stopped.

"Turn around," the voice commanded.

Steve turned. There was a little gasp and then Burley Dublin came into the lantern light, the gun in her hand glinting dull blue.

"Steve Hawn!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Steve lowered his hands carefully. "I was gettin' away," he said slowly. "What are *you* doin' here, Burley?"

The gun lifted again, and the girl's voice was sharp. "Put your hands up again. I've caught you. I knew that somebody was working on our stock. I knew it!"

Steve chose to disregard the command. He kept his hands lowered at his side and spoke carefully. "Foolin' with your stock? What do you mean, Burley?"

"You know what I mean. It was you. You—"

"Burley," Steve interrupted, his voice weary, "I've been arrested for killin' Lee Zillar. Do you think I'd come out here to play around with yore daddy's buckin' string with that hangin' over me?"

The girl gasped and the gun came down. Steve relaxed. He was mighty glad to have that gun pointed at the ground and not at his middle.

"For killing Lee Zillar—" Burley repeated. "But you didn't! You didn't, did you, Steve?"

"No," Steve answered, "I didn't. But they've got enough on me to make it look like I did. Somebody used my gun on him, an' he was sittin' in front of me in the stands this afternoon. I had a fight with him. They've got it all sewed up tight. Now what are you doin' here, Burley?"

The girl came forward, the gun dangling. "Somebody has been working on dad's bucking string," she explained. "You've seen what's been happening. Either the horses won't buck or else they go crazy like Rocking Chair did. I know that somebody's been doing something to them."

"There was a man here," Steve said. "I got away tonight an' I came out here. I didn't think they'd look for me at the fair grounds. I saw a light an' like a fool I followed it in here. There was somebody up by Salty's stall. I knocked down a pitchfork tryin' to see who it was an' he pulled out."

Burley said nothing. She stepped past Steve, picked up the lantern, and took another step. "Here's Salty's stall," she announced.

Steve came to join her. Salty, peaceful enough without a saddle in sight, rolled his eyes and looked at them above the low side of his stall.

"I don't see—" Burley began.

"Wait!" Steve said quickly. Something bright gleamed on Salty's shoulder. Steve stretched out his hand. When he withdrew it again, a little cylinder of metal gleamed in the lantern light.

"Needle," Steve said. "It stuck in his shoulder an' slipped off the gun when he pulled it out."

The girl's bright head bent forward. Together the two, man and girl, examined the shining little cylinder that lay in Steve's palm. It was the needle of a hypodermic syringe and, as Steve had said, it had stuck in Salty's shoulder when the syringe was removed.

"Dopin' the horses," Steve Hawn drawled, the very low and even level of his voice bespeaking danger. "Now who'd do that, Burley?"

The girl's eyes showed pin points of light as she lifted them to meet Steve's own. "Dad," she answered, "is trying to get a three-year contract to furnish the stock for this show. You know what has happened. Every horse of our string has been off. Salty wouldn't buck. Rocking Chair went crazy and killed himself and piled Ben. Even our Brahmas have been off. Steve, you know—"

"Yeah?"

"George Gault wants that contract too."

Steve shook his head. "I don't know Gault," he said. "He's new. But he's a big man, Burley. He's got a dude ranch over west of Buntlin an' he's got plenty of money. You don't think he'd do it, do you?"

"Somebody's doing it," Burley pointed out. "And, Steve"—her hand gripped his arm fiercely—"Lee Zillar spoke to dad this afternoon. He said for dad to see him tonight. Said he might have something to tell him. You don't suppose—"

"I suppose," Steve drawled slowly, and his eyes were narrow slits that barely caught the light, "that Zillar was killed because he knew somethin'. He was a tinhorn an' he'd play both ends against the middle. Likely he would have told your dad what he knew if there was enough money in it. That's why he was killed."

There was a brief silence. Then Burley said: "What will we do, Steve? Go to the police? We could—"

"Summers an' them would be glad enough to see me," Steve said bitterly. "I gave 'em the slip tonight. They'd be mighty glad if I come in. An' they wouldn't listen to me or you either. They think I killed Zillar. They're mighty sure of it. I can't go to the cops, Burley."

"Then what can we do?"

Steve shook his head. "You an' me know that your horses are bein' doped," he answered. "An' I know that I didn't kill Zillar. But there's nobody that will believe us, Burley."

Still the girl's hand was on Steve's arm. "We've got to do something," she said. "We've got to, Steve. I—" Her voice broke. Steve's arms slipped up and took the girl, drawing her close against his chest. The bright head lay there while the lantern burned, neglected, on the floor.

"We'll do somethin'," Steve promised. "Don't you fret, Burley. We'll do somethin'."

Burley lifted her face. It was tear-stained, but she managed a tremulous smile. "I know you will, Steve," she said, and then lowering her head again so that her face was hidden: "Why didn't you write to me, Steve? Why didn't you let me hear from you? Last summer at Fort Worth . . . I thought last summer that you . . . that we—"

Steve's arm closed a little tighter. "Ben got hurt," he said. "It took all we had to get him fixed up an' make the payments on the place. I tried to write you, Burley, but somehow I couldn't say what I wanted to. You see, I was fixin' to ask you—" He broke off.

"Yes, Steve?" Burley's voice was small and soft.

"I was fixin' to ask you to marry me," Steve blurted.

"Why didn't you, Steve?"

"Because I was broke an' didn't have any place to take you. Ben was laid up an' Jessie was goin' to have a baby an'—"

Again Burley lifted her face. Her eyes were luminous. "As if that would have made any difference!" she said. "I—"

Steve could scarcely believe the thing he read in the blue eyes that looked into his own. His arms closed a little tighter and then relaxed. "You mean you would have?" he demanded. "You mean—I love you, Burley, God knows I do. But I didn't have nothin' an' I—"

Burley Dublin's lips were trembling and very soft. "You fool, Steve," she whispered. "You fool! I don't know why I should fall in love with such a fool!"

On the alley floor, close by Salty's stall, the lantern burned neglected. Presently, because the wick was uneven, it began to smoke, the light dimming and the black carbon smudging the side of the chimney and trailing up through the top.

"I *am* a fool, Burley," Steve Hawn said softly. "An' I'm in an awful jam. I got no business to—" His speech was checked by Burley's lips and silence reigned throughout the big pavilion, a silence broken only by the movement of the animals stabled there. Then: "Fix the lantern, Steve," Burley suggested. "It's smoking.

Steve bent to take care of the lantern, and Burley, her eyes bright, raised her hands to rearrange her tumbled hair.

They talked awhile then, trying to decide what to do. Gradually, as they talked, a plan formed in Steve's mind, a plan concerning which he said nothing, for it was mad, foolish and dangerous. To Burley's suggestion that they go to her father, he would not assent. Phil Dublin was impetuous and he would, Steve said, immediately go before the rodeo committee.

"We can't have him doin' that," Steve argued. "We've got no evidence. Not much, anyhow. Suppose your dad did take this to the committee, then what? They'd send a vet here an' he'd find some of the horses doped. Salty, anyhow. Then

who would they say done it? We didn't catch anybody. We don't know. You know what would happen, Burley? It would get out an' whoever done this would start sayin' that your father doped the horses himself. That's what would happen. The only way to make this stick is to catch 'em."

"But dad—" Burley began.

"Another thing," Steve interrupted. "If we can catch the men who are doin' this we'll know who killed Zillar. I'd like to know that. It would take a noose right off my neck."

"Then what will we do, Steve?" Burley almost wailed. "Tomorrow's the last day of the show. We haven't any time. We've got to do something."

Steve stood quiet for a moment, thinking. Finally he spoke. "I'm goin' to Otto Irbach. This show is Otto's baby. If I can make him listen—" He stopped.

"I'll go with you," Burley declared. "You're right, Steve. We can talk to Otto. I'm sure he'll see things our way."

Steve opened his mouth to expostulate, and then closed it again. There was no use trying to dissuade Burley. Determination was written on every line of her small young face and, secretly, Steve was thrilled. It would be mighty fine to have Burley beside him. Mighty fine!

"And we'll go now!" Burley declared. "Come on, Steve."

V.

Burley took the lantern and led the way toward the door of the pavilion, Steve lingering in the darkness behind her. When they reached the door, Burley stepped out boldly. She had a right to be at the pavilion. Steve, with Burley's gun in his hand, waited back in the darkness.

The girl had gone some ten feet when she stopped. Out of the night a man said, "Hello, Burley. Lookin' after the stock?"

Steve breathed a silent sigh of relief. The speaker was the watchman.

"I thought I'd come and see if everything was all right," Burley answered. "Has anybody been in, Henry?"

"Everybody's gone to the dance," the watchman answered. "Guess they'll be back after a while. I didn't see you when you went in."

Burley laughed. "You weren't around," she countered.

Henry grumbled. "You're supposed to tell me when you go into the pavilion. You know that."

"And you're supposed to be watching!" Burley's voice was sharp. "The light over the door is out. You ought to fix that, Henry."

"Burned out, I guess," Henry said. "Listen, you ain't goin' to tell anybody that I didn't see you when you went in, are you? I'd get cussed by ol' Otto Irbach an' mebbe lose my job. You won't say nothin'?"

"Of course not," Burley assured him. "But you'd better fix the light before the boys come back."

"I'll get a new bulb," Henry agreed, and walked off, out of the lantern light.

Steve watched the lantern go on across toward the stands. When it was just a spark he slipped out of the pavilion door and followed.

Burley waited by the stands. She had extinguished the lantern. She called softly to Steve, and he joined her. They left the lantern and, skirting the black bulk of the stands, started toward town. After they had walked a few minutes, Steve glanced back. There was a dot of light over the pavilion door. Henry had replaced the bulb.

Otto Irbach lived in a big house near the edge of Buntlin. A widower, he had kept the house after his wife's death. It was close to the rodeo grounds, and the rodeo was the only baby that Otto Irbach had. From his house he could watch it. There was a light in the big window of the living room as Steve and Burley approached.

The two paused at the steps of the porch, then nerving themselves, they mounted the porch. Steve's hard knuckles rapped on the door.

Otto himself opened the door. The dim light from the hall came streaming out and fell on Burley. Otto's voice showed his surprise as he recognized her.

"Burley? What are you doing out this time of night?"

"I came to see you," Burley answered. "Aren't you going to let me in, Uncle Otto?"

"Sure, sure." Some of the surprise had gone from Irbach's voice. "But—" He stepped back as he spoke. Burley entered the hall. Steve, swift as a panther, followed. Otto Irbach's eyes were wide as he saw Steve. His mouth opened, gaping his astonishment.

"I've got to talk to you, Otto," Steve said quietly. "Burley an' me have something we've got to tell you."

Irbach backed toward the portiere-draped opening to the living room. Stepping past Burley, Steve followed. From the living room a voice said, "Who is it, Otto?"

Instantly Steve slipped Burley's gun into his hand. He had carried it tucked into the waistband of his overalls. Now it gleamed, dull and a wicked blue in the lighted hall. Irbach backed through the portieres and Steve, with a swift step, cleared them. Chris Urquart was seated in a chair, facing the portieres, and John de Kalb had risen and was standing in front of his chair. Steve placed his back against the wall beside the doorway and the gun in his hand covered the room.

"Easy," he warned.

De Kalb sat down. His eyes were level on Steve.

"Hawn, ain't you?" he drawled. "You're wanted for murder."

"That's one of the things I came to see Otto about!" Steve said crisply. "Nobody will get hurt if you keep still an' listen to me."

Urquart's voice was tinged with the soft slur of Texas as he spoke. "I never go up against the drop," he announced. "That's why I've lived this long."

Both Urquart and De Kalb were armed, Steve knew. Men of their profession, men who had risen to the heights they occupied, would not, dared not, lay aside their weapons at any time. And Urquart and De Kalb were dangerous. The slightest relaxation, the barest moment of inattention, and they would both go to war. Steve had to make his bargain quickly.

"I've got to talk to Otto," he stated. "Give me ten minutes. I'll put my gun on the table. How's that?"

The two men relaxed visibly. "Put it down, son," Urquart drawled. "You got your ten minutes."

Steve lowered the gun and, crossing the room, put it on the table.

"Now that's right comfortable," De Kalb remarked.

Turning, Steve faced Otto Irbach, who had not spoken since he entered the room.

"Otto," Steve said, "Burley an' me caught a man dopin' Dublin's horses in the pavilion tonight."

Irbach's eyes were already as wide as they could be. He moved from where he stood, crossing over until he was squarely in front of Steve.

"You caught somebody in the pavilion?" he demanded. "Who?"

Steve shook his head. "I don't know," he answered. "Listen an' I'll tell you."

He talked then, not alone to Irbach, but to the two men, describing how he had escaped from the city police of Buntlin, how he had sought sanctuary at the rodeo grounds, how he had entered the pavilion, and what he had seen there. Burley corroborated his story, adding details. She showed the needle of the hypodermic, taken from Salty's shoulder, and she repeated her statement concerning Lee Zillar; how Zillar had spoken to her father, requesting Dublin to meet him, and hinting at valuable information that he could give.

"You've got to believe us, Uncle Otto," Burley finished, her tone urgent. "You've just got to!"

During the recital, Otto Irbach had seated himself. Now he looked from one to another of the room's occupants. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, cleared his throat and was ready to speak, but De Kalb forestalled him.

"So," De Kalb drawled, "you figure the rodeo's crooked, do you? How about Chris an' me?"

It was Steve who answered the question, staring straight into the speaker's eyes. "This is the first show you ever judged," he answered frankly. "I think you an' Mr. Urquart are good officers, but I don't think you know much about rodeos. There's things that could be done, right in the arena, that you'd never catch."

Urquart and De Kalb exchanged glances. "Such as?" Urquart drawled.

"Such as a rider puttin' rosin on his chaps," Steve returned quickly. "Such as water bein' spilled on the track where it would do the most harm. There's plenty that's bein' done."

"By whom?"

"I don't know," Steve answered truthfully. "If I was in the arena, watchin', or if I was around the chutes, I could get some of it."

"By damn!" Irbach exploded. "I'll get to the bottom of this. Steve, you will help me. We'll find out—"

"I've got a murder charge hangin' over me," Steve interrupted quietly.

"That's so, too," De Kalb agreed. "What do you figure to do about that, Hawn?"

"I've got a kind of harebrained scheme," Steve answered, and grinned with boyish abashment. "*If* I was to stay out of jail an' *if* I was around the arena tomorrow, I've got an idea I could catch the man that's doin' this, catch him dead to rights."

"How?" Irbach demanded.

"It would be dangerous for you," Steve warned.

Otto Irbach's white eyebrows bristled. "This is my rodeo," he rasped. "Somebody is crooked. You think I'm afraid?"

Steve shook his head. "I've never seen you afraid, Otto," he answered. "Maybe Burley could do this, but I'd hate to have her. Look: I think Zillar was killed because he knew what was goin' on. He was goin' to tell Dublin for a price. They got to him before he could talk. Suppose they were given to believe you knew there was crooked work. Would they try to get you too?"

Very slowly Otto Irbach nodded his white head. "I think I see," he agreed. "You want me to talk an' hint around that I know—"

Steve interrupted. "I want you to say that as far as you're concerned, Phil Dublin gets the contract to furnish all the stock for this show for the next three years," he said. "That would mean that he'd get it. Everybody knows that you run this show, Otto. Then what do you think would happen?"

"Otto would be a target," De Kalb said quietly. "It's a fool idea, Hawn."

"I know it's a fool idea," Steve answered. "But it's the only thing I could think of."

"You think that George Gault is behind this?" Irbach snapped. "Steve, I don't believe it. I've listened to your story. I think—"

They all waited while Irbach let the sentence slide into silence. Then: "You think that this is all a cock-an'-bull story Burley an' me have told you," Steve finished Irbach's thought. "All right. Do

you men want to take me down to jail, or would you rather call up an' have Summers send his cops?"

He stood waiting for the answer.

Urquart pulled out a cigar, contemplated it, and then bit off the end. "Otto," he drawled, "I ain't much of a rodeo judge as has been shown, but I kind of *sabe* this sort of business. Hawn here was loose. He might have got away. It's been done. Instead of that he come here to talk to you. He ain't lyin', Otto."

De Kalb was slowly nodding his head in agreement. Irbach watched the two officers and, suddenly, the anger left his face. "Tomorrow I'll say that Dublin gets the contract," he announced suddenly.

"Tomorrow," De Kalb drawled, "you ain't goin' to be out of my sight, Otto."

"Nor mine," Urquart seconded.

"If I don't go to jail," Steve declared, "I'm goin' to be in the arena tomorrow."

"You don't go to jail, Hawn," Urquart announced. "At least, not yet." He paused briefly, then: "How you goin' to get into the arena? Everybody will be lookin' for you an'—"

"I'll get there," Steve promised. "I'll be on hand. Al Merchant an' me are of a size. I know his routine. If I put on his clothes an' his disguise, I could get in all right."

Both the officers were nodding. Otto Irbach's eyes were bright. "That would work," he agreed. "You could do that."

"An' Al's a friend of mine," Steve continued. "If I talked to him tonight, I could fix it up."

"An' that way you could help look after Otto," Urquart added.

"That way," Steve announced grimly, "I could watch the whole thing."

Burley, silent through all this conversation, stirred in her chair. "I'll watch too," she said. "I . . . I'm afraid. I—"

Otto arose and walked over to the girl, placing his hand on her shoulder. "There is nothing to be afraid of," he assured her. "I have Chris an' John an' Steve all looking after me. An' I am goin' to clean up my show! Nobody can do this to my rodeo. Nobody!"

"We'd better," Chris Urquart drawled, "talk this over. We better make our plans. We don't want any slip on this at all. Not a one."

De Kalb leaned forward in his chair. "Mebbe we'd better call in Summers," he suggested. "If we got men enough we cut down the danger. What do you think, Chris?"

Urquart studied the question, then shook his head. "The more that know about this, the more chance there is of a leak," he said. "We can get extra men at the arena without them knowin' why they're there, can't we, Otto?"

The latter grunted an affirmative. Buntlin's police would not refuse any request made of them by Otto Irbach; that he knew.

"What do you think, Steve?" he questioned. "So far this is your idea."

Steve pulled a chair around and sat down. "If I'm not goin' to jail," he drawled, "I'll tell you what I think."

The men talked on, planning, adding details, rejecting and accepting suggestions. Burley Dublin watched them, her eyes sparkling with the excitement of it all. Finally Steve stood up.

"That's it, then," he completed. "I'll push along.

The horse quit bucking and charged for the chutes—and Ben Oldham didn't have a chance to get clear!

I've got to get out to Al's place while it's still dark."

"And I've got to go home," Burley said, also rising.

"I'll take you home," Urquart offered. "John, you stay here with Otto. I'll be back right away."

Steve Hawn put on his hat. "Then tomorrow—" he began.

"Tomorrow," De Kalb said grimly, "we'll see you at the rodeo. Good luck, Hawn."

VI.

The cabin Al Merchant occupied was dark when Steve Hawn, by roundabout ways, reached the Eagle Tail camp ground. There was a window open in the back, and Merchant's regular snoring punctuated the quiet as Steve listened. The screen was hooked and Steve's knife and all his belongings were at the city hall, in Cap Summers' office. Steve tried to remove the screen, but could not.

"Al!" he whispered. "Al!"

The snoring went on. Steve tried again. "Al! It's me. Steve!"

The sound from within the cabin stopped.

"It's me—Steve Hawn, Al!" Steve whispered.

Merchant's face made a pale spot behind the screen. "You fool!" he growled. "I heard you'd got away. Here, I'll unhook the screen."

For a moment he fumbled with the hook, then the screen swung free, and, like a big snake, Steve Hawn slid over the window sill and into the cabin. Hooking the screen, he turned to Merchant, who was fumbling for the light. The drop chain clinked against the bulb as he touched it.

"Don't light up!" Steve warned. "Sit down, Al. I've got to talk to you."

The bed creaked as Merchant seated himself. "You sure take a lot for granted," he grumbled. "I'll help you out, you know that, Steve, but I sure hate to have my sleep broke up."

"I'm not goin' to get away yet," Steve said, sitting down beside Merchant. "I want you to hide me for a while. I didn't kill Zillar, Al."

"There's plenty that say you did," Merchant growled. "You got me in a spot, Steve, comin' here this way."

"I thought I could count on you, an' I needed your help," Steve answered.

"You got it." Merchant shifted. "You'll be all right here, Steve. How did you get loose?"

Steve answered that question. Merchant listened. When Steve finished the story of his escape, the clown chuckled softly. "I'd have give a dollar to see that," he said. "What are you plannin', now, Steve?"

"I want you to help me," Steve told him. "I ran into somethin' tonight. When I got loose I went to the pavilion out behind the arena. I run into somethin' there."

"What?"

"I think mebbe I know the reason Zillar was killed," Steve said. "Dublin's stock is bein' doped."

"The devil it is!" Merchant's voice was incredulous.

"Yeah. Got the makings, Al?"

There was a fumbling as Merchant searched his clothing for the desired papers and tobacco. Steve took them and in the dark selected a paper and filled the little trough with tobacco. "There was a man there stickin' a needle into Salty," he continued, forming a cigarette. "I didn't see who it was. I knocked down a pitchfork an' he got away. Have you got a match? Summers cleaned me pretty good down at the city hall."

"Wait till I roll one," Merchant said.

Again there was movement. Then a match flamed brightly. Steve bent forward and puffed. Merchant, too, applied the match to his smoke. He held it between his fingers, letting the match burn. Steve's eyes, blinded momentarily by the light, refocused themselves. Merchant dropped the match. It burned a moment on the floor, then resolved itself into a charred black stick.

"You caught a man!" Merchant repeated when he had lit his smoke. "Didn't see who it was, you said."

"That's right." Steve's voice held an odd timbre. The match on the floor had burned but an instant, and yet— "Give me another match, Al," Steve requested.

Again movement. Then Merchant placed a match in Steve's hand. Steve struck it and cupped the flame in his hands. He touched the flame to the cigarette and then bent down, holding the match close to the floor.

"Drop somethin'?" Merchant asked.

Steve let the match burn out, and straightened. "No," he answered.

In the light of the flaming match he had looked at Al Merchant's boots placed beside the bed. The boots were new, and stitched in silk upon their tops was a butterfly design.

"It's funny, me tellin' you this." Steve's voice was hard. "You must get a kick out of it."

"Get a kick out of it? Why?"

"Me tellin' you somethin' you already know all about," Steve answered, and struck!

Merchant grunted under the force of the blow and might have yelled, but he had no chance. Steve was on him, grappling him, forcing him down into the bedding. Merchant was wiry, almost as strong as Steve.

They battled in silence as far as their voices were concerned. The rest was not so quiet. They bumped against the wall, slid off the bed onto the floor, and struggled there. Steve had Merchant's head in chancery, his arm locked about it. Merchant was pumping blows into Steve's body. Gradually the blows weakened, and Merchant, gasping, tried to recover his breath. Suddenly he relaxed, giving up.

Steve kept his head hold, wary of the victory. Then, when it was apparent that Merchant was not shamming, he let go and straightened. Merchant remained inert, and Steve rose to his feet, breathing hard from the exertion. He went to the windows and drew the blinds, then fumbled for the hanging light. The chain clinked and light flooded the cabin. Merchant lay on the floor, eyes wide and showing their white, his mouth open and his chest heaving as he struggled for breath. Steve knelt down, pulled a sheet from out of the tangled bedding, and ripping off a length, fell to work.

When he finished, Merchant had recovered his breath. Steve clapped a hand across Merchant's mouth, and surveyed him grimly.

"I saw your boots," Steve said harshly. "Down there in the pavilion. That stitchin' gave you away, Al."

Merchant writhed under Steve's hand.

"I never thought it could be you," Steve said, and disappointment showed in his voice. "Who hired you, Al? Who was it? You goin' to talk?"

Merchant made small sounds against Steve's hand, and Steve lifted it a trifle. "Don't try to yell!" he warned.

"You poor damned fool!" gasped Merchant.

"It was you," Steve accused. "I know it was you. That stitchin' on your boots—"

"You damned fool!" Merchant had his breath back. "You think that's the only pair of boots like that in the world?"

Doubt gathered in Steve's mind. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe— He looked at the boots again. The butterfly pattern was plain.

"I know damned well it was you," he repeated. "That butterfly stitchin'—"

"Ellis is puttin' that on all the boots he makes!" Merchant snapped. "Untie me! Damn you, Steve!"

Steve scratched his head. He had been so sure, so very sure, and now— "I come up here to get you to help me," he announced. "I—"

"I'll help you to hell!" Merchant rasped. "Tie me up like this! You untie me! By Satan, I'll get Summers up here. I'll—"

Again Steve's hand stopped the angry flow of words. "Mebbe I was mistaken," Steve said dubiously, his hand still over the clown's mouth. "But I can't let you go now, Al. I just can't. I'll have to gag you, I reckon."

With his free hand he sought and found a strip of cloth. He forced Merchant's mouth open, against the angry man's struggles. Then, pushing in the cloth, he tied it there, apologizing the while he placed it.

"You're mad, Al," he said. "I don't blame you if I've made a mistake. If I have, I'm sure sorry, but I can't let you go to bust this up. I just can't. If I ain't mistaken, I got one of the men I want anyhow. I reckon you'll just have to stand for it, Al."

Merchant glared balefully at him, and made futile movements with his jaw.

"I'll fix you just as comfortable as I can," Steve promised. "I'm sure sorry about this, Al, but you see how it is?"

He lifted Merchant and placed him on the bed. With that done, he helped himself to the makings, turned out the light, and rolled a cigarette. He sat smoking and as the smoke curled lazily, his drawling voice informed Al Merchant of a few facts. Whether those facts made any impression Steve could not tell.

When daylight began to filter in around the drawn shades, Steve surveyed his captive. Merchant was still tied hard and fast. There was still plenty of anger in his eyes.

"You're still mad," Steve spoke sadly. "I don't blame you none. I reckon I'd be mad, too. Will you yell if I give you a drink?"

Merchant shook his head. Steve untied the lashing of the gag and, gentle as a woman, gave Merchant a drink of water. Merchant's voice was rusty when he spoke.

"You turn me loose an' git out. I'll give you half an hour to get clear before I tell Summers you were here," he promised.

Steve shook his head. "No," he said wearily. "I can't do that, Al. I got plans."

Outside the cabin there was the sound of someone passing. Merchant seemed to gather himself. There was a yell forthcoming, Steve sensed. When Merchant opened his mouth, Steve promptly popped in the gag once more.

"You see how it is, Al?" he asked as he tied the gag. "I just can't trust you."

During the morning, Steve dozed. He lay down beside Merchant on the bed, knowing that if the man moved he himself would waken. At noon, when he did wake up, he again talked gently to his captive. It was, so Steve said, all for the best.

"Likely you wouldn't have loaned me your clown outfit anyhow," he informed Merchant. "An' I got to have it, Al. I just got to. I'd give you another drink if you'd promise not to yell. Will you?"

Merchant shook his head and his eyes showed his fury. Steve sighed. "I'd like to make this as easy on you as I can," he said. "But you're makin' it tough, Al."

As he changed into Merchant's clown costume, Steve still sought to make his peace with his prisoner. He didn't meet with any success. He was convinced now that he had made a mistake, but still he dared not free the man he held captive. If he did, Merchant was angry enough to do almost anything. Steve was honestly sorry about the whole thing, and said so, but he did not turn Merchant loose, did not free the gag. He found some crackers and canned sardines in the cabin, and helped himself liberally to them, not offering any to Merchant.

Finished with his eating, Steve put Merchant's red wig on his head, placed the false red beard about his jaw after having applied theatrical putty to his nose with an inexpert hand. Then, clapping on Al's battered hat, he was ready to go. He stood for a moment surveying his captive after he reached the door; then, shaking his head, he opened the door and went on out and turned the key in the lock. It was too bad, but it just had to be that way!

VII.

Down at the rodeo grounds, Steve found Fancy Dan in a stall. He watered the horse and, rolling the barrel ahead of him and carrying the red flag that Merchant used in his act, started for the arena. Merchant's big Colt, loaded with blanks, bumped against his hip.

As he came down behind the chutes where the

contestants were assembling, Steve looked at all the boots that he could see. There was not anywhere in evidence a pair of boots with butterfly stitching on their tops. Steve grunted. Maybe he had not been mistaken, after all.

The show started. Two races were run off on the track, mighty exciting events. Jack Sharp announced that there were customers from twenty-four States in the stands, and named the States. That got a big hand.

The steer riding passed off without much trouble. Only one Brahma was bad, turning to charge his thrown rider. Steve lured the Brahma away and dived into his barrel just in time. The Brahma butted the barrel and whirled it around. Safe within it, Steve was telling himself that Al Merchant surely earned his money. When the steer riding was over he went back to the chutes.

"Pretty near got you that time, Al," Sam Hammers said, coming up.

Steve grunted. It wouldn't do to talk. Hammers might recognize his voice.

"You hear the news?" Hammers continued. "Ol' Otto Irbach's goin' to let the stock contract for next year to Dublin. A hell of a thing! Dublin's bucking string is so sorry a kid could ride it."

Again Steve grunted.

"You sure talk a lot," Hammers commented. "What's the matter with you, Al? Sore about somethin'?"

"You bronc riders get ready!" the arena manager was calling from the chutes. "Come on, Hammers; you're first out."

Steve breathed a sigh of relief as Hammers walked away. After a moment he followed the man. Hammers had stopped beside the chutes and was talking to Forrest Gerarden. Gerarden looked sharply toward Steve. Steve went around the chutes and out in front. He did not want too close scrutiny.

Up in the judges' stand Otto Irbach was sitting peering over the rail. Sharp, the announcer, was close beside him and—Steve started a little—Phil Dublin was on his other side. Chris Urquart, mounted on a smoky dun gelding, was down below the stand and so was John de Kalb. De Kalb looked at Steve and nodded almost imperceptibly.

Steve began to sweat. So far not a thing had happened. Everything was going smoothly. Suppose that he was wrong? Suppose no attempt was made to stop Irbach from giving Dublin that contract? The sweat gathered under the itching red hair of Steve's wig. He was crazy to think that there would be any attempt, just pure crazy. And yet, Lee Zillar had been killed yesterday. Just across the arena, in the stands Zillar had been killed. And the only reason Steve could think of that caused the gambler's death was this very thing, this matter of the stock contract.

Steve shook his head. It wasn't going to work. His scheme was all haywire. The whole day would pass uneventfully as far as Otto Irbach was concerned, and at the end of the day they would come down on Steve Hawn like a turkey on a June bug. Otto, Urquart, De Kalb, all of them.

Right in the middle of his self-recrimination, Steve stopped. The time had not come yet. Not yet. When had Zillar been killed? Steve answered that question just as he had answered it before. Zillar had been killed during the artillery fire. That was when it had happened. At that time and at that time only could a gun have been fired in the arena and not heard. When those salvos roared, no one would hear a gunshot.

And this afternoon there would be a time that was equally propitious. The infantry from Fort Marcy would drill late in the program. The infantry drill would close with the firing of volleys. It always closed that way. And when the volleys were fired— Steve gathered fresh hope. Maybe then the time would come.

Hammers came out of the chute on Black Jack. He made a ride and was picked up when the whistle blew. Sitting behind the pick-up man and waving his hat, he came back to the chutes. An arena hand gathered in Black Jack and led him back. Steve Hawn, leading Fancy Dan, managed to get in the way of the man leading Black Jack. The rider stopped. Steve pulled out of his path.

"Pretty good ride for Sam," the arena man said.

"Uh-huh," Steve agreed. He approached Black Jack warily, making as though he would mount the horse. This was all part of his clowning. Black Jack shied and fought away. Steve managed to get his hand on the saddle and found it sticky. When he drew his hand away he saw white glints on the palm. Sam Hammers had been using rosin when he rode Black Jack. Score one for Steve Hawn!

Leaving Black Jack, Steve betook himself to Fancy Dan and mounted. The horse stood, ears drooping. Steve waved his hand, made as though to spur Dan in the shoulder, and the little spotted mule broke in two. Steve went off backward and the crowd roared.

One after another the riders came out of the chutes. One man was thrown. Another blew a stirrup and was out of the picture. Still another grabbed leather, disqualifying himself. As each horse was led back, Steve brought Fancy Dan up, made a show of comparing the two, horse and mule, and then, shaking his head, retired. It was plain as plain could be that he was measuring the bucking qualities of the horses against those of the mule and finding the horses lacking.

Out behind the chutes, the bucking over, the contestants were taking their ease. Some were smoking, some squatting beside the fence, others sitting on it.

"That's new, ain't it, Al?" Toberry asked, pausing beside Steve. "I never seen you pull that stunt."

Steve nodded. "Uh-huh," he grunted.

"It works good," Toberry said. "You ought to keep it in the act."

Steve walked over to the fence. He had not realized just how tough it would be to come into the arena disguised, and keep his identity secret.

Toberry followed Steve. They walked past Hammers and Forrest Gerarden. Hammers was pulling off his chaps, getting ready for the bulldogging. As Hammers' chaps swung free, Steve saw the man's boots, and almost jumped with surprise. The boots had a butterfly design stitched in their tops.

"What's the matter with you, Al?" Toberry demanded. "You act like a bear with a sore head."

Steve tried to imitate Al Merchant's slow drawl. "Cold in my head," he said.

"Better take care of it," Toberry warned.

They had paused as they spoke and now Steve

glanced toward Hammers and Gerarden again. Once more he restrained a start of surprise. Gerarden had pulled off his chaps and he too wore boots with butterfly stitching.

Toberry had followed Steve's glance. "You got a pair of them boots from Ellis, didn't you, Al?" he remarked. "I sure like the design he puts into the tops. Let's see yours."

Of all the clothing that Al Merchant owned, his boots were the only things that did not fit Steve. He was wearing his own, and the Ace of Diamonds design, inlaid in their tops, would be as plain a give-away as a man could ask. Steve did not answer Ed Toberry, but went on over to the fence. He heard Gerarden and Hammers behind him, talking. Then Hammers came up to the fence and stopped beside him and Toberry.

"They say that Burley Dublin is goin' to put on her high-school act today," Hammers announced. "I want to see it. I thought her horse was lame."

"Lady *was* lame," Toberry responded. "Guess they got her leg fixed up."

From the judges' stand Jack Sharp made his announcement: "A treat that we thought we would not have," he called, and in the stands the loudspeakers bellowed the words. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Burley Dublin on Lady!"

"Guess I'll go on down an' get ready," Hammers said. "The bulldoggin's next." He pushed away from the fence and departed. A rodeo hand took his place. His horse, held by loose reins, was behind him. Steve moved to make room, and the man leaned against the gate in the fence.

"She's sure a pretty rider," he said.

Burley was out in the center of the arena on Lady. The bay's coat gleamed and her neck arched and she curvetted gently, grace and beauty in every line of horse and rider. Deliberately, using the showmanship ingrained in her, Burley began to put Lady through her act. Over by the stand the band played, and the horse, rising to the music, was a beautiful piece of mechanism.

"Sure a pretty rider," the arena man said again. "She— By damn!"

Something had gone wrong. Down at the far end of the arena a steer was loose, lumbering out of the pens, long horns weaving as it trotted forward. A mounted man came to head off the steer, and the big animal dodged and picked up speed. Lady, frightened, whirled, off balance. Something gave way—prhaps the leg that had been lamed—and Lady and Burley went down in a heap. The horse scrambled up, but for a moment the girl lay still.

The arena hand snapped a curse and flung the gate open, ready to go in and help. In that instant the steer spied the inert figure on the ground and, head lowered, charged. Steve Hawn, forgetting everything but the necessity of the moment, caught the reins from the arena man's lax hand, threw the right rein over the horse's neck and went up without touching a stirrup. His spurs kicked in and the frightened horse bolted through the gate and out across the arena.

It was a matter of split seconds. Even while men ran from the fence and the chutes, while yet the first frightened scream hung above the grandstands, Steve reached the running steer. He kicked loose his feet, bent forward, balancing, and as the broad back came weaving along beside him, jumped.

His hands struck horns. The horse went on past. A good horse that, fast and steady as all arena horses should be. Even as he let his feet slide in and under, as his boot heels dug for purchase, Steve had that thought. Then he was twisting, bringing a horn down. Once more Steve thrust a steer's horn into the soft earth of the arena and once more a steer, momentum scarcely checked by the man who clung to him, went up and over and struck the earth with a thud. Steve held the steer. He felt, rather than saw, a roper snare the threshing hind feet of the animal. Then Steve was up and running, making for Burley. As he reached her, the girl pushed her hand against the ground and lifted herself.

Steve did not know that he had lost his wig. He did not know that his false red beard was gone. All that he was conscious of was that Burley was in his arms and sobbing against his chest. For a moment he held her so, and then men surrounded them.

Hammers was there, and Ed Toberry; Forrest Gerarden, pick-up men, the men who worked the arena. Puffing, Otto Irbach forced his way through the group. Urquart was beside Irbach, and at the edge of the circle De Kalb was dismounting. Away across the arena, at a gate, Cap Summers strode along beside a man whose blazing eyes showed his fury: Al Merchant, loose and on the prod. But Steve Hawn saw none of these things.

"Are you all right, Burley?" he demanded. "Are you hurt?"

Burley's sobbing lessened. Her arms were about Steve. He lifted his face and looked at the men about him.

Sam Hammers stood stock-still, incredulity showing in his expression. Ed Toberry's face also showed his astonishment. Forrest Gerarden was bent forward so that his silk shirt billowed. As he straightened and the shirt tightened, Steve saw the outline of a familiar bulge.

Releasing Burley, Steve came to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"It's Steve Hawn!" Toberry rasped. "You—" He did not finish what he was about to say. Steve moved, a single lithe stride that carried him past Burley so that he faced Gerarden.

"It was you!" Steve rapped. "It was you in the pavilion last night. You've got a gun under your shirt. You aimed to use it on Otto. I know you, Gerarden. I've got you caught!"

Under the accusation, Gerarden drew back a little and then, teeth showing in an angry snarl, he moved. His hand flashed up, diving in under the silk shirt, snaking out laden with a weapon.

"Hawn!" he snarled, and then the gun came level.

Steve's movement matched Gerarden's. Down to the butt of Al Merchant's old Frontier Colt—the old Colt that was loaded with blanks—Steve's hand darted. The Colt came clear, rose to Steve's waist, and as men scrambled away, as they got out of line of fire, the gun belched smoke and fire and paper wadding. Struck full in the face at a distance of less than three feet, Gerarden dropped his weapon and staggered back, clapping his hands to his eyes. At the edge of the crowd John de Kalb spoke quietly to Hammers.

"Hold it!" he ordered. "I wouldn't do that!"

Slowly Hammers took his hand out from beneath his shirt. Across from De Kalb and Hammers an angry voice was lifted.

"Lemme through!" Al Merchant was yelling. "Damn him! I don't care what he done. He tied me up an' stole my clothes. Lemme through where I can git at him!"

VIII.

Down at the hospital that evening the doctor gave strict orders that they must be quiet and not excite the patient. He knew the story of what had happened at the rodeo grounds, and he was emphatic in his warning. So, all the way up in the elevator, Steve and Burley, Otto Irbach and Chris Urquart, and Phil Dublin and John de Kalb made good resolutions. But when they entered the room and saw Ben Oldham sitting up in bed, and Jessie's eyes, bright and questioning, upon them, Otto let all his good intentions slough off his shoulders. He kissed Jessie and he would have hugged Ben had it not been for Urquart's detaining arm. It had to come. Unable to restrain the news, Otto told the story.

Ben knew part of it. Jessie had learned of Steve's arrest and escape and had told her husband. But the rest was all news to both of them. Old Otto poured it out: how Steve and Burley had come to his house during the night, how they had planned, how Steve had gone to the arena disguised in Al Merchant's costume. Otto omitted nothing.

"*An'* "—he waved his arms by way of emphasis—"it is all true, what Steve told us. George Gault hired Gerarden an' Hammers to crook my show, an' Steve, here, caught them an' they are in jail. I tell you, Ben—"

Ben shook his head. It was coming too fast for him, and noting his puzzlement, Chris Urquart interrupted.

"It was kind of a plot," Urquart explained. "Gault wanted to place his stock here at the show. It would be good advertising for his dude outfit, an' he needed the money. With two green judges like John an' me there was a chance he'd get away with it. So Gerarden an' Hammers took the job, an' hired some of Otto's arena men to help. They used a lot of tricks an' they needled Dublin's stock until it slowed down. But whatever they used worked wrong on Rocking Chair, an' he went crazy. That's how come you got hurt."

Ben nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"When Steve made his getaway, he went to the pavilion," Urquart continued. "He saw a man foolin' with Dublin's stock, but he didn't get a good look at him. All he saw good was his boots. He thought he could spot him by the boots. Steve an' Burley came down an' talked it over with Otto an' John an' me, an' we throwed in with him. Then this afternoon he spotted a gun under Gerarden's shirt. Gerarden was wearin' boots like those Steve had seen, but so was Hammers an' Al Merchant. Steve thought that Merchant was in it at first."

"Not Al," Ben stated with conviction, and shook his bandaged head. "You should have known better than that, Steve."

"I should have," Steve agreed. "I don't think Al will ever forgive me."

"I fix that." Otto Irbach could not be stilled. "I give Al a contract to clown this show for the next ten years. That will fix things with him."

Urquart grinned, and Steve, seated on the edge of the bed beside Ben, could not restrain his grin. Otto would have given Steve Hawn the world right at that moment, and Steve knew it.

"So then what happened?" Ben encouraged.

"So then," Urquart took up the tale again, "Steve jumped Gerarden an' accused him of layin' for Otto. Otto told you about the scheme we had; how he was goin' to say that Dublin was to have the stock contract. That was reason enough for Gerarden to be layin' for him. He'd already killed Zillar because Zillar knew what was goin' on an' had threatened to talk to Dublin. One more killin' wouldn't make any difference. Gerarden went for his gun an' Steve beat him out an' snapped a blank in his face. Gerarden thought Steve had killed him."

"So," the irrepressible Otto took up the story, "Gerarden thinks he is goin' to die an' he told us all about it. How he stole Steve's gun an' shot Zillar an' all the rest. I tell you they don't crook Otto Irbach an' get away with it," he finished, his chest swelled like a pouter pigeon's breast.

Steve's voice and grin were slow as he looked at his partner. "So we came up to tell you about it, Ben," he said. "We kind of thought you'd like to know. I knew you'd be worried."

"I wasn't worried much," Ben told him. "I knew you didn't kill Zillar. I knew that right along."

"You were the only one that believed that; you an' Jessie an' Burley," Steve said. "Well, it's fixed up now. Otto's goin' to loan us a little money an'

Dublin gets the stock contract. The fellows that did the business are in jail. Gault, too. I guess that's the size of it, Ben. Well, the doctor told us not to excite—" He stopped. Boots thumped in the corridor, and the doorknob turned. Every eye in the room was on the door.

. It was Al Merchant that came in. He paused just inside the door, searching each face turned toward him. Then his gaze settled on Steve.

"I been lookin' for you," he announced. "I—"

"Al"—Otto Irbach stepped forward hastily—"I have just been talking. How would you like to clown this show next year? How would you like to clown it for the next ten years. I think—" He stopped. Al Merchant was not paying any attention to what he said.

"Well, Al," Steve said slowly, "you found me. I guess I got somethin' comin'. I . . . well, I . . . aw, hell, Al! I couldn't see it no other way. I thought I had to."

Merchant's face was inscrutable. "You had to tie me up an' gag me an' take my clothes?" he questioned. "That's what you figured?"

Steve Hawn's eyes were miserable. He nodded his head. "That's what I figured," he agreed. "I'm sorry, Al. I—"

Burley came to stand beside Steve, placing her hand on his arm. It seemed as though she thought she had to stand beside Steve; would stand beside him all the rest of her life. Side by side, the two of them confronted Al Merchant.

Very slowly a grin rippled across Merchant's face. It began at his eyes and spread down to the corners of his mouth and made deep creases.

"I guess you did have to," he agreed. "I guess—Hell, Steve! I was mad. I was mad enough to upset yore apple cart. If I'd've got loose sooner, I'd of done it. When the woman that runs the camp come around to change the beddin' an' turned me loose, I was plenty sore."

Steve was grinning now, too, and Burley was smiling. Over on the bed Ben Oldham relaxed. He and Steve had always thought a good deal of Al Merchant. Al thought a good deal of them. It would have been tough to lose Al's friendship.

"All right, Steve," Al said, still grinning. "It's all right. Only thing is I'm goin' to winter with you an' Ben this year. You're goin' to have to keep me. An' feed me, too. I ain't never goin' to forgive you for sittin' there, eatin' my sardines an' crackers an' not givin' me a bite." Impulsively, his hand shot out and Steve's grasped it.

De Kalb stirred nervously. "The doctor said for us not to excite you, Oldham," he announced. "We'd better go."

"I ain't excited," Ben protested. "Not a bit. I never felt better in my life."

"Just the same, we're goin'," Otto declared. He signaled the others, De Kalb, Urquart, Al Merchant and Phil Dublin. "Come on," he ordered and started toward the door.

When they were gone, Steve walked over and sat down on the edge of his partner's bed. Burley joined Jessie beside the window. Steve looked at Ben. The latter's eyes were bright and sparkling.

"It was my fault, Ben," Steve said awkwardly. "If I hadn't gone off my head an' lost our money you wouldn't be laid up. I—" He paused.

"Forget it," Ben said. "It all tallied out, Steve. If you hadn't done that, Gault an' Gerarden an' Hammers would have got away with their scheme. It's all right, Steve."

Silence fell between the two. From beside the window Jessie's voice came clearly.

"So I'll just stay here with Ben," she was saying. "They've got the cutest nursery and it's almost time." Her voice lapsed and a little half-smile trembled about her lips. Burley murmured something, and Jessie gave a little exclamation.

"Oh, Burley!" she cried delightedly. "I'm so happy for you!" And she kissed the other girl.

Ben stared up at his partner, his eyes very bright and quizzical. Steve's face was red.

"Burley an' me—" he began, and stopped.

"Yeah," said Ben. "I *sabe*, Steve, I *sabe*."

THE END.

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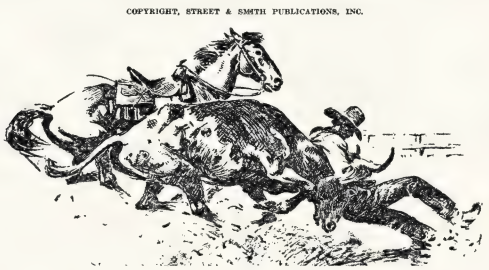


BRANDED ARROW POINTED

By Walt Coburn

Wingy Carr and his fighting gun hawks were tougher than whang leather—but would gun savvy alone take that herd up the Chisholm Trail to Abilene?

I.

It was the kind of a challenge that a man either had to take up or else quit the country. And unless Bowie Burdett took the quitter's way out, he would have to kill the three Traverse brothers, a job no man in that part of Texas would care to tackle, drunk or sober. The Traverse boys had Bowie in a tight and were waiting there in the little cow town of Menard for him to show up.

They had butchered a Burdett steer at the edge of the blackjack-bosque thicket on the San Saba River. The hide, with its BB brand big as a sign on a box car, and the head with the ears on it marked in the Burdett swallow-fork and under-butt was there on the ground, with the paunch and entrails and the blood still wet. And the tracks of the light democrat wagon drawn by a span of mules led straight to town.

The wagon and mule team were there behind Eli Traverse's Longhorn Saloon and his butcher shop next door, and the bloodstained meat tarp was spread out across the wagon box to dry.

Lute Traverse had driven the team, and as Bowie rode up to the long hitch rack in front of the Longhorn Saloon and dismounted he saw Lute's lanky figure going in the back door. Lute had looked back across his shoulder at Bowie, and there had been a leering grin on his long, lantern-jawed face.

Inside, Eli would be tending bar, and Lorne would be somewhere handy. Bowie Burdett swung from his saddle, and the thought struck him as he stepped down on the ground that it might be the last time he'd ever quit a horse's back. But he shook off that feeling of dread. He hitched up his cartridge belt, crossed the wide plank walk and went through the swinging half doors of the Longhorn with a grin and a nod to the dozen or more loungers grouped around outside the adobe saloon. And just as he went in he saw Lorne Traverse come across the wide, dusty street from the general store, and he knew that Lorne would follow him into the saloon. And the odds were just what he figured they would be at the showdown. Three to one.

There must have been fifteen cowpunchers lined up at the bar, and several of them were strangers Bowie had never seen before. He had no time now to wonder who they were or where they'd come from. He saw Lute standing at the end of the bar with a glass of whiskey in his left hand, and his right hand out of sight beneath the level of the pine-board bar. And Eli, the oldest of the three Traverse boys, was behind the bar with his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his unbuttoned vest, and his right hand wasn't three inches from the six-shooter he packed in an armpit holster. Lute's mouth was a crooked slit between his hawk beak of a nose, and his long jaw that was covered by a week's growth of sand-colored whiskers. His green eyes were bloodshot and evil-looking.

Eli was heavier set, and his face was puffy and red from too much whiskey. He had reddish hair and a heavy red mustache that he curled upward at the ends that covered the hard corners of his mouth. His eyes were a greenish color and he had a ready, meaningless laugh and a big-handed manner that were as treacherous as his eyes. He was always playing practical jokes on drunks, and there was an edge of bullying cruelty to his hoorawing and jobbing. He was left-handed with a gun, and that gave him his right hand free for the handshake he offered to friend, enemy or stranger. More than once he had shaken hands with a man and at the same moment pulled his gun from its armpit shoulder holster with his left hand. The gun would roar and Eli's big red-haired hand would hang onto the luckless victim's hand while the heavy lead slugs tore the man's heart out. Then he'd laugh and drop the dead man's hand.

Bowie ignored the proffered hand, and in the mirror behind the bar he saw young Lorne standing about ten feet behind him. Lorne was twenty-one; a tall, raw-boned youth with sandy hair and gray eyes. He was about three inches taller and perhaps fifteen pounds heavier than Bowie Burdett. Bowie

NORTH

was twenty-two and nearly six feet tall, slim, tow-headed, blunt-jawed, with clear blue eyes that looked almost gray in the sunlight.

Bowie shoved his left hand into the pocket of his brush-scarred chaps and took out a thick roll of fresh beef hide. He tossed it on the bar so that it unrolled with the hair side up and the big BB brand showing.

"That's part of the hide that belongs to the beef Lute just hung in your meat house, Eli. Read 'er."

Eli looked at the strip of limp hide. Lute's eyes followed Eli's. And in that same split second, Bowie's hand closed over the neck of a half-filled bottle of whiskey and his wrist and forearm jerked swiftly. The bottle shot across his left shoulder and caught Lorne Traverse square in the face before he could duck.

Nevada's horse would have quit and floated downstream like a log if Bowie hadn't roped it.

Bowie whirled as the bottle left his hand, and he dove for Lorne, butting him and throwing him backward a split second after the heavy bottle caught Lorne across his nose and mouth.

Bowie went to the floor with Lorne, his left hand gripping Lorne's right arm at the wrist, his own right hand gripping his gun. His long legs wrapped around young Traverse's and he held him there for a shield.

Eli and Lute jerked their guns, but they dared not shoot for fear of hitting their young brother. Lorne was dazed. His broken nose was spouting blood and Bowie was twisting his gun hand up behind his back with a pain-racking pressure that threatened to unjoint it at the elbow.

"Put up your guns!" Bowie's voice sounded harsh and a little shrill as he slapped his gun barrel across Lorne's flat, lean jaw. "I kin kill you both. Shoot and you'll hit Lorne!"

He hadn't counted on any help, but he was getting it. The strangers he had hardly noticed were bunched and their guns were in their hands.

"Better do what the young buck says, saloonman," growled one of them. "Leave him alone till he gits done."

Eli and Lute stared at the hard-looking strangers and slowly put away their guns. The four or five men they knew in the saloon had backed out of the line of fire and were making it plain that they weren't interfering.

"Take to him, young feller," the grizzled spokesman for the strangers called to Bowie. "Whup 'im

till he bawls. Them other two ain't buyin' chips in the game."

Bowie let go of Lorne's wrist and disarmed him with a swift jerk, throwing Lorne's gun across the floor. He unwrapped his legs and stood up with a backward spring.

He was breathing hard, and when he saw that Eli and Lute were not going to make a gun play, he shoved his six-shooter into its holster.

"Stand up and fight, you beef-stealin' son!" he told Lorne.

Lorne pulled his arm across his blood-smeared nose and got unsteadily to his feet. His slitted pale-gray eyes shifted to his brothers. Eli's rasping voice choked with futile rage.

"Have at 'im, Lorne! Tromp his guts out. These damned sons got me 'n' Lute foul. You've whupped him before. Tear 'im apart!"

"My arm's busted and my nose—" Lorne began.

Bowie took a step forward and slapped him across the mouth with the flat of his hand. "Your arm's all right. All you got's a nosebleed."

Lorne spat blood and charged him. Bowie met the rush with a wild swing that glanced off Lorne's head. Then he clinched and they went down, wrestling and hitting at each other with short, hard punches. Neither of them used any science. They fought as most cowpunchers fought, and no holds were barred. They could gouge or bite or kick. There was nothing clean or really sportsmanlike about it. Anything went, and the fight went to the tougher man.

Bowie Burdett had fought Lorne and Lute Traverse since they had grown up together as kids and went to the same cow-country school. Each knew the other's weak points, and they knew all the tricks that they both were using now. Lorne had won more often than he had ever lost to Bowie Burdett. But he was fighting now with a broken nose that still half blinded him with throbbing pain, and his right arm was still a little numb from the twisting Bowie had given it. It was Bowie's fight, and he was following up the lead he had gained over the bigger youth.

Bowie fought himself clear and rolled over, scrambling to his feet. Lorne got to his feet clumsily, and Bowie knocked him flat on his back with a lucky swing. Lorne got up again, but before he could get set Bowie was smashing at his bloody face, beating him to his knees and then letting him get up again. The next time Bowie knocked him down, Lorne rolled over on his belly and covered his battered face with his arms. He was beaten. Bowie told him to get up, but Lorne lay there, his long, big-boned frame quivering and his muffled voice told Bowie he'd had enough.

"Directly I git my wind," panted Bowie, "I'll take you on, Lute. And I'll lick you. And Eli's goin' to pay me for that BB steer you 'n' Lorne butchered."

"Have at 'im, Lute," rasped Eli. His red face was mottled, and there was murder in his bloodshot, congested green eyes. "Beat his brains loose. Tromp his guts out!"

Men had crowded in from outside and were blocking the doorway. A tall, lean, sandy-complexioned man made a lane through the crowd, and instead of a hand at the end of his left arm, he wore a sharp hook which was screwed into a steel-banded wooden butt. The hook was grabbing men by their shirt collars and flinging them backward. There was a mirthless grin on the one-armed man's face as his wicked, sharp-pointed hook picked men from their feet and flung them aside with an effortless speed that left the victims gaping open-mouthed.

The tall, one-armed man's face was weather-beaten and the corners of his mouth and eyes were deeply lined. His eyes were as blue as the Texas sky, but sharp and piercing. And as they swept the saloon they glinted with a strange mixture of hardness and humor.

And it was as if a ghost had climbed from some lonely, unmarked grave and appeared here by some trick of black magic. Eli's face was mottled gray and purplish, and his green eyes protruded like gooseberries. Lute Traverse had raised a long arm up in front of his face as if to ward off a blow. Then he dropped his arm and forced a sickly grin.

Bowie's back had been toward the door, and his eyes had been watching Eli and Lute so that he hadn't seen the one-armed man rake his way through the crowded doorway with his steel hook. But Bowie saw the look on Eli's face and he whirled, expecting he knew not what, his face battered and blood-spattered, his eyes slitted, bloodshot, and his knuckle-bruised fists cocked and ready to swing. Then his arms dropped to his sides, and like Eli and Lute, he stared at the tall man with the hook.

"Wingy Carr!" Bowie's voice was a croaking whisper.

There was a motley mixture of emotions behind his eyes and the sharp croak of his dry-throated voice. A mingling of wild hope and stark despair, friendliness and distrust, and perhaps a little fear and no small amount of awe.

Two years ago this one-armed cowhand, Wingy Carr, had been trail boss of a big pool herd that had left the San Saba country, headed north for Montana.

The bulk of the cattle in that herd wore either the Burdett BB brand or the Traverse Bench T iron. Ben Burdett, father of Bowie, had gone north with the trail herd. So had Hank Traverse, father of the three Traverse brothers.

Somewhere north of Doan's Crossing on the Red River that big trail herd had split and scattered. Ben Burdett and Hank Traverse had never been heard from. The trail herd and the men who had started up the long Western Trail had vanished and

countless confusing, ugly stories had drifted back to the San Saba range concerning the fate of the trail drovers and the big pool herd. The story that carried the most weight claimed that Ben Burdett had killed Hank Traverse. That Ben Burdett, more commonly known as B. B., and Wingy Carr, had split the herd and sold the cattle to Oklahoma rustlers. The three Traverse brothers had accepted that version, and for the past year they had made life hell for Bowie Burdett, harassing him in every way that a young cowman with a little bunch of cattle can be bothered, mavericking his big calves, butchering his beef steers, taunting him, and finally sucking him into this trap tonight.

And there, in the middle of the floor, stood Wingy Carr, the man who had taken more cattle up the trails than any other one trail boss in Texas. He had crossed the Staked Plains with the Goodnight and Loving herds that went into New Mexico; he had gone up the Potter and Bacon Trail that branched at Albany, Texas, and followed it to Cheyenne and fought rustlers from Tascosa to Las Animas and Injuns from there on north to Cheyenne. He had taken a big herd up the Western Trail that crossed the Arkansas River at Dodge City. And he had gone up the Chisholm Trail by way of Abilene. Wingy Carr was said to be the best and toughest trail boss in Texas. He had become an almost legendary figure.

Wingy Carr's enemies claimed that he had killed both Ben Burdett and Hank Traverse and had disposed of the cattle in his own way in Oklahoma or New Mexico.

Lorne Traverse, sensing that something unusual was happening, had rolled over on his side, his battered eyes blinking. He sighted Wingy Carr and sat up with a jerk for all the world like a blood-smeared Jack-in-the-box.

Wingy Carr's leathery face crinkled in a sort of grin. His blue eyes missed nothing. He gave them no greeting of any sort. Instead, he sang the one and only song that he had ever been heard to sing. And his voice was dry as the waterless stretch of Staked Plains—dry and brittle and harsh as a crow's.

"Oh, she came from County Kerry
On her way to Londonderry.
She was going there to marry
So she wouldn't have to work.
Oh, she jumped upon the table
Just to show that she was able.
She was Jerry McGilligan's daughter from old Cork!"

His spurs jingled as his long legs and dusty boots moved in a jig; he was as light on his feet as a dancing master. The jig ended in a leap and a swift backward kick that sent a cigarette flying ceilingward from the lips of a tall cowboy.

Then Wingy Carr was standing at the bar and he lifted a bottle of whiskey to his mouth and gulped it down as though it were water.

The Traverse brothers and Bowie had seen it all done before, because it was Wingy Carr's way of starting a prolonged town spree. And Bowie saw that the strangers here in the Longhorn who had so unexpectedly taken his part against the Traverses acted as if they were watching something they had witnessed more than once. Bowie reckoned that these men were Wingy's friends who had come down the trail with him from parts unknown.

"Belly up to the bar!" Wingy's wooden stump with its dust-powdered, blue-flannel sleeve buttoned just above the sharp steel hook, waved the crowd to the bar. His sharp blue eyes flicked cold, humorous glances at Bowie and the three Traverse brothers. And no man in the place had the temerity to ask Wingy Carr what had become of B. B. Burdett and Hank Traverse, and what had happened to the big pool herd that had vanished so mysteriously north of the Red River two years ago. You didn't ask this one-armed trail boss questions. You waited till he got ready to talk, and you listened without interrupting, and you took what information he gave out. And there was no use asking him to tell more, because he told what he wanted to be known and kept back the rest. Because that steel hook could rip and tear and kill with the savage swiftness of a cougar. And Wingy's right hand could spin a six-shooter like a pin wheel and put six bullets into a playing card at twenty-five feet. Or he could whirl and kick a man under the chin and lay him cold as a rock. And he had a quick-triggered, uncertain, satanic temper.

"There seemed to be some kind of trouble a-goin' on," Wingy drawled to the grizzled cowpuncher stranger who had told Eli and Lute to put up their guns. "What was the rip, Nevada?"

The unshaved, wiry, bowlegged little Nevada spat tobacco juice at a cuspidor and shoved the piece of fresh hide with the BB brand on it along the bar.

"The tow-headed young feller laid this on the bar and told the saloon feller he was collectin' for the steer meat it come off," he explained. "He was gittin' the job started when you come in."

"If you butchered a BB beef, Eli, you better pay young Bowie what he's got a-comin'. They tell me that beef's cheap right now in Texas. Twenty-five dollars would be top price." Wingy Carr had drained the last drop of a half-filled quart bottle of corn whiskey. His grin was wolfish and his eyes were cold as blue ice.

"Shore thing, Wingy," Eli agreed quickly. "I was just jobbin' Bowie some. Lute and Lorne butchered the ox fer a josh. No hard feelin's."

"If that's young Lorne hidin' behind that bloody busted mask," grinned Wingy, "it looks like the joke's on the leastest of the Traverse boys. This the best likker you got, Eli? Gimme another horn. Takes forty-rod likker to cut the alkali dust in a

man's throat. Me 'n' the boys here bin scoutin' a new route. It's better'n a hundred and fifty miles as the crow flies between the Pecos and where we hit the San Saba, and every blasted water hole but a gip water springs was dry as a bone. Last night was the first time since we left the Pecos that we ain't dry camped. But it's likker, not water, that washes the dust out o' ol' Wingy Carr's pipes. And we'll drink to the dead bones of B. B. Burdett and Hank Traverse. Bet the devil's got his hands full with that ornery pair of rannihans hittin' hell with their guns a-smokin'."

II.

Wingy Carr and his six tough cowhands spent three days and nights painting the cow town of Menard, Texas, a lurid red. Bowie Burdett hung around town hoping that the one-armed trail boss would tell him where and when and how his father had died. And the three Traverse brothers were just as curious as Bowie. But none of them learned anything he could actually tie to.

Lorne and Lute took turns tending bar because Wingy was making Eli take drink for drink with him. And not even Eli, who bragged that he was a two-quart-a-day man, could drink with the gray-haired, leathery, ornery-tempered Wingy Carr, who never got off his feet and kept eating dry jerky all the time he was drinking. Wingy got just so drunk and no drunker, and he kept emptying one bottle after another until all of his tough cowhands had gone out and under.

Then Wingy slacked off on whiskey and began working on strong black coffee and canned tomatoes and a Mexican tripe stew called *menuda*. His cowpunchers sobered up, got shaves and haircuts and put on new clothes they bought at the general store. They were camped on the San Saba, a few miles from town, and Nevada rode in and told Bowie Burdett and the three Traverse brothers to ride out to camp. Wingy wanted to have a powwow with them.

Bowie rode out to camp with Nevada. He tried to pump the hard-bitten little dried-up-looking cowpuncher. Nevada just told him that he reckoned Wingy would tell him what he wanted to know when he got around to it and that he, Nevada, didn't know anything nohow. But, he said, Wingy had taken a liking to Bowie, and when that one-armed warthawg liked a man he'd claw his way through hell and back to do him a good turn.

Wingy waited till the three Traverse brothers got there. He sipped a tin cup that was half whiskey and half black coffee, and his blue eyes were bloodshot. When his flat lips pulled back from his white teeth, Bowie was reminded of a gray wolf baring its fangs.

"Don't ask me what become of Hank Traverse and B. B. Burdett," Wingy said flatly. "Because any answer I'd give would be a long guess and mebbeso wrong. They got into an argument at Doan's Crossin' on the Red because while the herd laid over there a day or two to rest up, a feller from Abilene, Kansas, showed up drivin' a team of slick-lookin' mules hooked to a yaller buckboard that had a barrel of whiskey with a spigot roped to it. He was reppin' for the town of Abilene and the Kansas-Pacific Railroad. He was tryin' to git the trail herds to swing off eastward onto the trail that went up through Oklahoma City to Abilene, where he had cattle cars a-waitin' to ship cattle to Chicago.

"We drunk the feller's likker while he powwowed with Hank an' B. B., and we're still nowheres near the bottom of his barrel when a couple of light covered wagons pulls in from Dodge City. There's a string band and half a dozen honkatonk gals and a keg or two of Dodge City's best forty-rod likker in them two wagons. *They're* reppin' fer Dodge City.

"Damnedest cow-camp jamboree I ever seen. Hank must've liked the Dodge City likker best, or mebbe it was the buckskin-haired gal they called Big Casino that got him persuaded, because he said he was goin' on up the Western Trail to Dodge City and trail on north.

"B. B. said he'd string his bets with this feller from Abilene whose name was Joe McCoy.

"Hank Traverse and B. B. Burdett come close to fightin' 'er out with guns there at Doan's Crossin'. I got in between 'em and I sent the Dodge City layout a-packin'. And McCoy hooked up his team of mules and headed back for Abilene.

"The next mornin' we cut the herd. Hank Tra-

verse started up the Dodge City Trail with his Bench T cattle. B. B. Burdett headed east to hit the Chisholm Trail to Abilene." Wingy paused for another gulp from the tin cup. "And that's the last time I ever seen Hank Traverse or Ben Burdett alive. Alive or dead, fer that matter, because what I found many months later was just their graves. There's a grave on the Western Trail between Doan's Crossin' on the Red River and the crossin' on the Canadian that's marked with a slab with Hank Traverse's name on it. And there's a pile of rocks where the Chisholm Trail crosses the Canadian where they claim Ben Burdett is buried. I've never dug up the graves because I wouldn't know their bones from any stranger's. And that's as much as I kin tell you without repeatin' what might be lies that you kin pick up free fer the askin' at any cow camp along the two trails.

"Me," Wingy Carr went on, spiking his half-empty cup from a jug, "I quit 'em at Doan's Crossin' on the Red. There was cattle in that herd that didn't wear Burdett's BB brand or the Traverse Bench T iron. Accordin' to the agreement I made with Hank and B. B. when we left the San Saba, all strays that got into the trail herd was to go to me. And I put 'em in the road iron, which was an arrow on the right ribs. It's easy enough for a herd to gather strays on the way up the trail. And when I'm takin' a herd north, no man cuts my herd."

Wingy Carr's teeth showed, and his frosty blue eyes glinted as he sat cross-legged on the ground.

The pit of Bowie's stomach tightened in a hard, aching knot as he listened to Wingy's flat-toned voice and saw the bright-blue glitter of his puckered eyes, and he watched the cruel, wicked point of Wingy's steel hook rip deep gashes in the sod. And he remembered things he had heard about this one-armed trail boss whose herds grew as they traveled north up the long trail, and what Wingy Carr was said to do to nesters or cowmen who claimed he was increasing his trail herd with cattle he rustled of a night along the way. No man had ever cut so much as a wind-bellied dogie out of one of Wingy Carr's trail herds. But more than one man had died or been run off trying to hold up Wingy's trail herd to cut back strays.

"I had three hundred head in my Arrow road iron," Wingy finished his story, "and I had three men and horses to mount 'em. I cut west and followed the Red to where the Potter and Bacon Trail crossed 'er. And I drove north up the Potter and Bacon Trail to Cheyenne. I delivered four hundred and ninety-five head with a crew of five men at Cheyenne. And none of the five were the men who had left the Red with me. Them three cowboys who had come with me from the San Saba and stuck with me when the outfit split at Doan's Crossin' all got killed along the way. And I paid off them other five at Cheyenne and ain't seen 'em since.

"I've bin two years gittin' back to the San Saba. I've had a look at Hank Traverse's grave on the Western Trail and I've stopped by the rock pile where they say Ben Burdett is planted. I crossed back over into Oklahoma and Colorado and New Mexico, and I've sighted cattle that wore the Bench T and BB brands. I just come down the Pecos River with these men in hopes of scoutin' out a shorter, better trail, but I had no luck. Half our horses died from lack of feed and water. Two of the boys went locoed from heat and no water and killed each other, and we left their bones for the buzzards to pick because we was too hard pushed to waste time and strength diggin' graves in ground baked hard as dobe brick."

Wingy passed the jug to his men, and they drank silently, as if it were some grim toast to the bleached bones of the men who had died out there on the dread wasteland of the Staked Plains, the Llano Estacado, where the white bones of cattle and horses and men tell a mute, grim story of the hardships endured by the cattle drives out of Texas.

"You've got cattle here along the San Saba." Wingy Carr's sharp blue eyes looked hard at Bowie and the three Traverse brothers. "You've got cattle that's crowdin' your range and eatin' you broke. You got no Texas market for them steers. You got to trail 'em north or set here and go broke. I've got a crew of picked trail hands an' I'm aimin' to take cattle up the trail. I'll buy what steers you got to sell, but I ain't payin' more than five dollars a head, and I'm takin' only the stuff that'll stand the journey. Or you kin pool your cattle with mine and pay me with money or steers at the end of the trail and you kin come along. Like Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett done."

Wingy drained his tin cup and grinned at Bowie Burdett and the three Traverse brothers.

"Sleep on 'er and show up at daybreak and we'll commence workin' the San Saba bosques and open country," he suggested. "That's all. Me 'n' my men is beddin' down fer to ketch some sleep." His cold blue eyes and a short motion with the steel hook dismissed Bowie and the three Traverse brothers with curt finality.

III.

It was near dusk when Bowie rode back to his ranch on the north bank of the San Saba. The brush quail were calling back and forth, and wild doves sang their mournful, soft song and their wings whistled as they left the water's edge and headed in big coveys for the bosques where they mated and nested.

Now and then the brush would crash as a wild steer tunneled deeper into the thick brush where no rider could follow. These big longhorn steers were wild, and it took top cowhands and fast horses to gather them. Two years ago Bowie had helped his

father and a crew of men work the bosques to gather the cattle that went up the trail, but since that last roundup the bosques had never been worked clean because Bowie hadn't the money to hire a roundup crew, and there would have been no market for his beef steers, anyhow. He had range-branded his calf crop as best he could, working the open range in the daytime and lying in wait by moonlight to rope and brand the bosque stuff when they slipped from the heavy thickets to come to water. And right now there were plenty of two-year-old unbranded mavericks in the brush.

Bowie's father had told him that he'd be back in a few months with money and they'd clean up the range and trail everything north to Montana, where Wingy Carr had told him there was a world of open range that was a cowman's paradise. But Ben Burdett had not come back, and Wingy said that a pile of rocks along the Chisholm Trail marked his grave.

Wingy's brief story had weighted Bowie's heart like lead, and the mournful call of the doves saddened him as he tried to figure out just what he should do. And all the time he knew that there was only one thing left to do, and that was to let Wingy and his outfit work the BB range and he'd go up the trail with his cattle. Because for two years Lute and Lorne Traverse and the Bench T cowpunchers had been whittling on the remnants of the BB cattle, branding his mavericks, butchering his beef and shoving his cows across the San Saba River onto the Bench T range.

The Traverse boys had money to run their outfit, but Bowie was broke. He had lived on beef and beans and the stuff he raised in a truck garden he'd planted, and a can of tomatoes was a luxury. His clothes were patched and mended, and he had made the pair of brush-scarred chaps he wore. He had resoled his boots and patched the uppers until they were shapeless and shabby as a pair of plow boots and his hat was battered and pulled out of shape so that he looked like some disreputable range tramp.

In Bowie's pocket was the twenty-five dollars Wingy had made Eli Traverse pay him for the butchered BB beef, and that was all the cash money he had in the world. But there was, he reckoned, five hundred head of cattle in the BB iron that were fit to go up the trail, and he had a remuda of fifty head of the best cow horses a man ever forked. The twenty-five dollars would buy him a new pair of boots and a cheap hat, and maybe he could sell some of his horses to Wingy Carr, who seemed to have a lot of money. He would go back to Wingy's camp at daybreak and give the one-armed trail boss his decision.

Last night Eli Traverse had gotten friendly. He had got Bowie off to one side and told him that it was his guess that Wingy Carr had killed Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett at Doan's Crossing, and that Wingy had fetched his tough crew back to pull off some kind of an ornery deal. And Eli had pointed out that Bowie could see for himself that Wingy was lousy with real money, and no matter what kind of a story Wingy Carr had to tell, he, Eli Traverse, wasn't taking it for the truth.

And today when Wingy had told his story and Bowie rode a ways with Eli while Lute and Lorne headed for town ahead of them, Eli repeated what he'd said the night before. Wingy had offered five dollars a head and he'd take nothing but the best steers and dry cows, cutting back everything else into the culls. That kind of a price wasn't a bid. It was a downright insult. Wingy was trying to pull them into the same trap he'd used to kill off Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett, and if Bowie was fool enough to throw in with Wingy Carr, then he'd better have a doctor examine his head.

Eli asked Bowie what he aimed to do, and Bowie told him he'd sleep on it. He'd rather be killed somewhere along the trail, he remarked, than bush-whacked on his own range or robbed like a drunk sheepherder. Eli had laughed that big, meaningless, treacherous laugh of his and rode on to overtake Lute and Lorne. Bowie had swung up the river and headed for the home ranch, feeling low spirited and a little desperate.

The dusk had closed in thick as Bowie rode up to the only home he had ever known, a cluster of corrals and branding pens, and a barn and run-down, neglected adobe house and empty bunkhouse. There was not even a dog to welcome him since somebody had poisoned his four hounds a few weeks ago with strychnine baits, killing the best ketch dogs along the San Saba, dogs that had helped him get the wild cattle out of the heavily timbered bosques.

Bowie was too wrapped up in brooding, dejected thought to be on the lookout for danger. Then it all happened in swift seconds. His horse spooked at something in the black shadows along the outside of the barn as he rode up. A bullet stung his neck like a yellowjacket hornet. He saw the spurt of gunfire and heard a roar that sounded as loud as a cannon in the stillness of early nightfall.

Bowie jumped his whirling, lunging horse into the open doorway of the barn and quit his saddle with a leap that threw him forward on his hands and knees as a gun inside the barn crashed almost in his face. He rolled over and over, clawing for his gun. He saw a man's shadowy form leap from the darkness of the stall nearest the barn door. Thumbing back the hammer of his six-shooter, Bowie fired as the man ran out of the barn. The man stumbled, then caught himself and vanished around the side of the open door. Bowie heard the sound of a shot outside.

Bowie was on his feet now, and he made his way cautiously toward the open doorway of the barn, his six-shooter in his hand. He was crouched forward and his knees were bent a little, and he set

his feet down cautiously to keep his spurs from jingling. He heard somebody ride off into the night at a run, and when he peered around the side of the doorway he saw a man sprawled face down and motionless on the ground not ten feet away. The man was dead and his outflung arm lay along the ground with his hand still gripping his six-shooter. It was the man who had been in the barn, the partner of the outside bushwhacker.

A saddled horse with the bridle reins trailing on the ground came from the brush near the barn, nickering and trying to follow the horse that had just been ridden away. The nickering horse stepped on the trailing bridle reins and stopped with a jerk, whimpering uneasily, still scared by the shooting.

It was several long minutes before Bowie left the barn and cautiously approached the motionless form sprawled on the ground. Even in the uncertain light of gathering night he knew that the man was stone dead, and he recognized him from what he could see of his hair and face.

The dead man was a cousin of the Traverse boys. His name was something else, but he called himself Traverse, and everybody knew him as Blackie because he was too dark-complexioned to be all white, and he was a breed of some kind. Blackie did a lot of the jobs that were too ornery and dirty for the Traverse brothers to touch. Lute and Lorne took him along when they were up to something tricky.

Bowie squatted on his boot heels with his six-shooter in his hand. He began to be conscious of the throbbing pain in the side of his neck and the wet, warm stickiness of blood that was soaking his shirt collar. Somebody was coming on horseback, and Bowie ducked back into the barn. He found his saddled horse in one of the stalls and slid his saddle gun from the scabbard. Then he went back to the door with the carbine ready to put up a fight.

But only one man was coming, and he called Bowie's name a couple of times.

"If you're there, Bowie, hold your fire. It's Nevada!"

Bowie eased down the hammer of his carbine. He called out in a voice that he tried to make steady and unconcerned:

"I'm here, Nevada! Be careful. There might be snakes in the brush. There's a dead un here at the barn."

Bowie was almighty glad to see the little dried-up cowpuncher ride up. Nevada's horse shied off from the dead man, and the cowboy cussed softly, telling his horse he hadn't orter spook at a li'le ol' thing like a dead man because it wasn't the first un he'd ever sighted.

"Who's the dead feller, Bowie?" he asked bluntly.

"Blackie Traverse. Cousin of Eli and Lute and Lorne. He wasn't in town with the others. Stays at the Bench T Ranch. There was another bushwhacker with 'im. Lorne, I reckon; or mebbe Lute."

Nevada dismounted. He turned the dead man over, striking a match or two.

"Shot square in the briskit," he said, and his tight skin cracked into wrinkles as he grinned and spat tobacco juice at the ground. "You couldn't have done a better job in broad daylight, Bowie."

"I taken one snap shot at him as he quit the barn on the run," Bowie declared. "Any bullet of mine would have hit him in the back."

Nevada struck another match and found a bullet tear in the dead man's thigh. Bowie told him that would be his shot. Blackie, he said, had been killed by his pardner out in the brush, who like as not got rattled and mistook Blackie for Bowie and let him have it in the brisket.

"They'll make a ruckus about it," he said. "Even if Blackie was about as low-down and ornery as ary man along the San Saba. He's a Traverse, and the Traverses hang together. They brag that if you kill one Traverse you've got 'em all to kill."

"Then I reckon," said Nevada, "that your only bet is to throw in with Wingy and us fellers."

Nevada's voice didn't sound any too happy or cordial, and there was a worried-looking scowl puckering deep lines between his ragged eyebrows as he lifted his drooping white mustache with two spread fingers and spat thoughtfully through them. A habit of his when he was thinking out some knotty problem, Bowie was to learn when he got to know him better.

"You plumb certain that it was one of them Traverse things that was with this Blackie?" Nevada demanded.

"I couldn't swear to it because I didn't even ketch sight of him. But Lute and Lorne use Blackie a lot when they're workin' the bosques of a moonlight night. It was Blackie that put the poison baits out and killed my hounds. They put him up to it because he's the only man I know that's mean and low-down enough to poison a man's dogs. I reckon Lorne is rememberin' that busted nose I give 'im. You think it was somebody else with Blackie?"

"Can't say, son. Hard to tell, offhand. There's more than just the Traverse brothers that would stand to profit if you got killed and left no kin behind to claim them BB cattle. This bosque country, Wingy claims, ain't bin worked clean since your dad went up the trail two years ago, and there's a slue of cattle along this river when it gits worked right. There's more than one man besides the Traverses that'd pot-shoot a man to claim them BB cattle. But I ain't comin' out flat-footed and callin' no names. And what I've said kin be left thisaway between the two of us. Savvy?"

Nevada's eyes were light-gray and sharp as steel, and Bowie knew that here stood a little old tough customer who would side a friend in a tight or hate an enemy till he died.

"I slipped off from camp after Wingy bedded down," continued Nevada, measuring his words carefully, his eyes watching Bowie, "and I cold-trailed you here to tell you not to sell your cattle to Wingy Carr and not to take your cattle up the trail with this herd he's goin' to trail north. But I got here too late. This dead hombre changes things consider'ble. Gums the cards. Calls for a new shuffle and a new deal. You'll have to pool the remnants of the BB cattle with Wingy Carr's trail herd and come along. And I'll side you as best I kin, young Bowie Burdett, though there's them that'll tell you that I'm a rattlesnake and worse. But you got no choice left. And now let's git shut of this dead feller. Plant him deep and cover the place. This bosque bein' your own back yard, you orter be able to pick a place where a dead breed and his saddle and bridle won't never git found. And we'll say nothin' and keep our eyes and ears open and see what happens when Blackie Traverse turns up missin'. Because I got a notion that Blackie Traverse wasn't killed by mistake tonight."

"How do you mean?" Bowie was puzzled.

No man alive could have handled that Arrow crew except Wingy Carr—the toughest boss that ever took the long trail north.

"Ride tight and say nothin'. We'll play the cards as they're dealt us. Just fer the hell of it, let's say that the feller out in the brush had two ca'tridges in his gun. One had your name on it. One had Blackie's name on it. Mebbeso he figured he'd wounded you and that Blackie finished the job inside the barn. And he didn't trust Blackie to keep his mouth shut whether or not you was dead or alive. So he kills Blackie just fer luck and rides off. And he knows that when a man kills one Traverse he's got to kill 'em all, and, dead or alive, you're in a hell of a tight. But he can't say nothin' because he's into 'er above the hocks and it's a dirty, bloody bog. He'll keep his mouth shut. And him and you and me will be the only three men alive who know what happened to Blackie Traverse when Blackie turns up missin'."

"Then you don't think it was Lute or Lorne that killed Blackie by mistake?" asked Bowie.

"Can't say. Your guess might be better than mine. And neither of us kin prove anything one way or another. But if we wait long enough and live long enough the feller that done the killin' is goin' to let somethin' slip. He'll give us a look at

his hole card." He looked at Bowie curiously. "What ails your neck that you're holdin' your head sideways and holdin' your hand on your collar?"

"A bullet kind o' nicked me," admitted Bowie. "It don't amount to nothin'."

Nevada made a bandage of Bowie's old silk neck handkerchief. Then they carried Blackie Traverse's dead body deep into the bosque and dug a grave and buried the dead man's saddle and other belongings with the corpse. They covered the place and erased their tracks as best they could. Then they went to the house and washed up, and Bowie made a pot of strong black coffee. After they drank big cups of it, Nevada went back to camp, and Bowie waited till just before daybreak. When he got to the camp he found Wingy Carr and his men eating breakfast.

Wingy's hard blue eyes stared at Bowie, and his lips spread back in a grin.

"Light and tie into some grub, Bowie," he invited. "Made up your mind about what you'll do?"

"If you'll help me work the range," Bowie told him, "I'll throw the BB cattle into your trail herd and go north with you."

"He's a chip off the ol' block, eh, Nevada? But you wouldn't know because you never knowed his daddy, ol' B. B."

Bowie saw Wingy look sharply at the little old cowpuncher who was squatted on his hunkers warming his brush-scabbed hands with a big tin cup of steaming coffee, his battered hat brim slanted across his steel-gray eyes.

Nevada met Wingy's sharp stare with one equally cold and penetrating. "The young feller," he said, his tone dry and brittle as old sticks breaking, "will do to take along, Wingy."

Wingy nodded and sipped his coffee. Bowie could not tell just what it was that made him know that there was something almost like hatred between Wingy Carr and the little old cowpuncher who seemed to have no name but Nevada. But he knew that Nevada was one man who was not in the least awed or in any way afraid of the dangerous, one-armed trail boss. Their eyes had met and held like the meeting of two sharp steel blades, and there had been no victory or defeat, no giving away. And when their eyes had lowered to their coffee it had been like two steel blades going back into leather sheaths.

None of the other men seemed to notice the tension. They were all suffering the after effects of their town celebration and were silent and a little sullen and touchy. They were sobering up on strong black coffee, canned tomatoes and *menuda*. Nevada was the only man who was cold sober, because he was the only man of them who had not gotten drunk in town. Wingy was still spiking his coffee with whiskey, but he was sober and his hand was steady and his temper was sharp. He tossed his empty cup into the dish pan and buckled on his chaps.

"Ketch your horses," he ordered crisply. "We're workin' the south side of the San Saba first. I gave thé Traverse outfit till daylight to make up their minds. It's daylight and they ain't here. There's plenty of BB strays over on their Bench T range and we're workin' that range first. So don't leave your saddle guns at camp." Wingy's hook picked up his catch rope and he headed for the rope corral that held about sixty head of the best-looking horses Bowie had ever seen.

Wingy Carr had no real legal right to work the Bench T range, and Bowie wondered just what the three Traverse brothers were going to do about it. There were some tough cowhands on the Bench T pay roll, and they drew fighting wages. And Eli and Lute and Lorne traveled on their toughness. Wingy Carr was gathering a herd to take up the trail, and Bowie knew that he would claim every stray, every critter not in the Bench T iron that he rounded up. And the bosques on the south side of the San Saba, there on the Bench T range, were thick with strays in a score or more of brands. Wingy Carr was carrying the fight to the Traverses, and Bowie was one of Wingy's outfit now.

"Ride tight and say nothin', son," said Nevada, unbuckling his catch rope from his saddle. "That one-winged son's got blood in 'is eye this mornin'. And it ain't just likker that's got him on the prod."

Nevada followed Wingy into the corral. The horses they roped and led out to saddle were brands that had been blotched and blotted out. Stolen horses, still a little gaunt and drawn after that grueling hard drive across the Staked Plains.

A remuda of stolen horses and as tough and hard bitten a crew of cowhands as ever Bowie had hoped to see. He was the only young cowboy among them—probably the only one, he reckoned, who did not have a price on his head. They were no better than a gang of outlaws, riding a range where they had no right to work, forking stolen horses. A wolf pack. Wingy, the crippled old gray leader who was leader only so long as he could lash out and kill quicker than the fastest, most vicious wolf in his snarling pack. It was mighty close to rustling, Bowie knew.

All Wingy's men were survivors of gun fights and dangers and hardships. The trail boss had recruited them one at a time, picking them for their hardness and their cattle savvy, and because he was cautious he never hired two men who might be partners and who would team up on him. And whenever his sharp-eyed wariness discovered that any two or three men in his outfit were getting too friendly toward one another he would either break up the collusion or fire the men. He could rib up bitter enmities between men he wanted to separate for any reason. Thus Wingy nipped any conspiracy

against him. He had something on every man in his outfit, while they were unable to accuse him of any crime bigger than horse stealing or a little cattle rustling. And what drifting cowboy had not, somewhere, sometime along his back trail, stolen a horse or butchered another man's beef or branded another man's maverick?

But these men were cowpunchers, and they had their good points as well as their ugly side. They would stick together in a tight. And as long as they worked for Wingy they took his orders and fought for him. Two of the outfit had gone mad from thirst or other causes on that punishing trip across the Staked Plains and they had been killed. Or they had killed one another. The others were taking fighting orders now from Wingy Carr, and the prospect of trouble was acting like a morning-after pick-me-up. They joshed one another as they saddled their horses and waited for their leader's orders.

Wingy had rolled back the flannel sleeve along his wooden peg that fastened with a leather harness to the stump of hard-muscled forearm ending about five inches below the elbow. He tightened the little straps that fitted the stump of hard flesh and bone into a saddle-leather socket that was riveted to the wooden contrivance and its steel hook. He worked it with quick, supple elbow bendings and tested the strength of the artificial arm by hooking a hundred-pound sack of sugar and swinging it and tossing it fifteen or twenty feet. Then he rolled down the sleeve and buttoned it just above the hook and rolled a cigarette with his one hand. He swung aboard his horse and grinned at his fighting crew.

"I'll sweat the dead booze out o' your tough hides today, cowhands, and that's a promise. *Andale!*" He headed for the river crossing at a long lope, and the others followed in twos or single file, scattered like a little cavalry detail deploying for scouting duty.

Nevada rode alongside Bowie as they forded the San Saba. The joshing and talking had ceased and the only sound was the splashing of horses in the river. The eyes of every man searched the bosque on the south side of the river for signs of Traverse cowpunchers. The sun was just rising. The men kept their hat brims pulled low, and those who wore gloves to protect their hands from the thorny brush had cut the trigger finger from the right-hand glove. Wingy's right glove had been so altered and his hand stayed near the cedar butt of his long-barreled six-shooter.

Bowie's heart beat fast and the blood pounded against the tight bandage around his neck under the closely knotted silk neck handkerchief. The thrill of excitement that he held curbed tingled his nerves and made him feel a little drunk and eager for whatever was to come. Nevada gave him a side-long glance, and the mouth under his drooping white mustache grinned faintly.

IV.

Wingy scattered his riders in pairs and they worked the open country as clean as a hound's tooth. The sun was noon-high and they threw the gathered cattle into the big brush corrals on the Bench T Ranch. The men were sweaty, and their horses were leg-weary, but they had worked off the effects of their town jag and were ready for grub and a change of horses before they trimmed the herd they had corraled. No man of them had sighted a Bench T rider all morning, and a few of them took it as a sign that they had the Traverse outfit buffaloed. But Bowie knew different, and he said so to Nevada and Wingy.

"It's when the Traverse outfit is bushed up that they're the most likely to be makin' trouble."

Nevada gave him a sharp look, and Wingy grinned like a gray wolf showing his teeth.

"You'd oughta know, eh, Bowie? And you'll never come closer to bein' right. I bet Eli and Lute and Lorne has bin bushed up and a-watchin' us and makin' bad medicine like three Cheyenne medicine men. But the Traverse boys is eatin' crow meat and likin' it before I'm done. And speakin' of grub, let's see what there's to eat at the cook cabin. You, Nevada, take two of the crew to camp. Don't stop for grub. Change horses and fetch us back a change of horses here. Take Bowie along. He knows the short trail across. And if you hear shootin' you'll know that Eli Traverse and his two-bit outfit has come alive. Come a-foggin'."

"If the Bench T hired hands is huntin' for targets," Nevada said flatly, "ducks on the water is easier pickin's than quail in the bosque. Let's go, Bowie."

"Sandy, you and Chick go with Nevada. Herb and Slim and Buck stay here with me. Four water ducks and four brush quail." Wingy's thin lips flattened back in a grin and he looked straight at Nevada. "Hell divers is harder to hit than quail. They see a puff of gun smoke and dive before the bullet reaches 'em."

Nevada started to say something, then changed his mind, and, lifting his white mustache with two fingers, spat a brown streak at a bush and rode off. Wingy had given them the dirty end of the stick, and every man in the outfit knew it, but they needed fresh horses, and the cattle in the corral couldn't be left unguarded. Wingy and his men could guard the corral gates from the cabin with their Winchesters and shoot from cover at any Bench T men who tried to turn the cattle out. But men crossing the open river made shooting-gallery targets for bushwhackers.

"Scatter out, boys," Nevada told his three companions when they headed for the crossing. "We'll cross one at a time. I'll go first."

"There's another crossin' a quarter of a mile above," Bowie told Nevada. "Where the river nar-

rows and it ain't fifty feet. It's swimmin' water between bank and bank."

"You'll do to take along, son," said Nevada. "Lead us to 'er. Does Wingy know about that upper crossin'?"

"I reckon he does," Bowie lied quickly, and rode on ahead to avoid the steely scrutiny of Nevada's eyes.

That narrow channel had been cut only last spring by the flood water, and Wingy hadn't been here for two years. There was probably not a man besides Lute and Lorne and the dead Blackie and Bowie who had ever tackled that unused strip of deep, narrow water, because quicksand made untried crossings dangerous and the cowpunchers picked the wider and shallow crossings along the San Saba.

Bowie had lied because he didn't want to cause trouble or in any way tighten the tension he'd felt existed between Nevada and Wingy Carr. Bowie was only twenty-two, but he had a man's level head on his wide shoulders.

Bowie crossed first to show the others how to hit the swift current and land on the other side, where a narrow trail climbing the steep bank on the north side was the only landing place for a quarter of a mile because the thick brush and steep banks made landing impossible.

He landed safely, and Sandy and Chick both made it. Nevada was the last man to cross. His horse slid down the south bank and into swift swimming water and ducked its ears and pawed and would have quit and floated downstream like a log if Bowie hadn't roped the horse and dragged it to the north bank by his saddlehorn with Nevada sopping wet and gripping the saddlehorn with both hands and his leathery face as gray as lead. There was an almost scared look in the old cowpuncher's eyes as he climbed the bank on foot behind his horse. The animal pawed its way, snorting, up the bank when Bowie slacked his saddle rope.

Then Nevada grinned, and that grin thanked Bowie better than all the words in the world, and the old cowpuncher cussed because his plug of natural leaf had gotten wet. It released the tension of fear that had tightened around the heart of the old cowhand, who couldn't swim a lick and was too proud to admit it until a long time later.

They changed horses at camp and crossed back the way they had come, each leading a fresh horse. This time Nevada rode a better water horse. And the landing on the south bank was easier because the current pulled them diagonally across and landed them on an open strip ten feet wide.

They had just landed when they heard shooting. It sounded like a dozen guns exploding all at the same time.

"Tie them led horses in the brush!" Nevada said quickly. "Pronto! Now let's git at 'em!"

He led the way back as if he'd traveled the trail a thousand times instead of the one time when Bowie had picked it out for them. He was in the lead and had shot twice at some sort of moving target when Bowie and the other two men overtook him. Nevada had pulled up and off the trail behind some brush. A riderless horse, spooked by the shooting, was jumping and lunging. Bowie saw a wounded man sitting up on the ground with both hands in the air and yelling hoarsely for them not to kill him.

Then, from the direction of the corrals not a hundred yards away, Eli Traverse's big voice was bellowing, and his words were a little blurred by the bawling of cattle.

"Quit shootin', Wingy! We've had enough!"

Nevada motioned to Bowie to come along with him, and they rode toward the corrals with their guns in their hands.

There were two dead men on the ground near the corral gates. The three Traverse brothers sat their uneasy horses with their hands raised clear of their guns. There was no sign of Wingy and his three men or their horses, but Wingy's voice came from the cabin, rasping like a rusty file pulled across old iron.

"You must be gittin' feeble-minded, Eli, to think we'd corral them cattle, then all of us go to camp. Which of you Traverse boys is the best cook? Git down and rustle us brush poppers some dinner. Set 'em afoot, Nevada!"

"Might as well git down, boys," Eli Traverse told his brothers. His heavy face was mottled, and his bloodshot green eyes glared at Nevada and Bowie, then slid toward the cabin.

Wingy stepped out of the cabin, a carbine in the crook of his crippled arm, and the steel hook through the magazine lever. The six-shooter in his right hand indicated the dead man at each gate.

"Better shovel 'em a grave, Lorne, before the blow flies git to 'em. Lute kin do the cookin'. Me 'n' Eli will make medicine while the grub's a-cookin'. I'd have started a fire in the stove, but I didn't want no Bench T eyes sightin' smoke. We bushed up, Nevada, and when they rode up we picked off the two that leaned from their saddles to open the two gates. And now they're shovin' open the gate to hell. Don't burn the grub, Lute. My cowboys is fussy as hell about their frijoles and carne."

"Blackie," said Eli, getting something of his blustering swagger back as he pulled a bottle from the deep pocket of his bullhide chaps, "is the best camp cook in Texas. He'd orter be somewhere around if you warthawgs ain't spooked him plumb outta the country."

"Blackie ain't around," said Wingy. "Leastways we ain't sighted him. Don't git too drunk to read brands and earmarks, Eli. Because you and Lute and Lorne is goin' to spend the next few hours cut-

tin' strays. And you better not make no mistakes. Everything that ain't bin born from a Bench T mammy gits cut into the stray bunch, and the strays is ourn. Mebbeso you'll change your mind and come up the trail with me, Eli?"

Eli Traverse choked on the too-warm whiskey, and his mottled face purpled. He quit coughing and took a slow drink from his bottle and corked it. He shoved the bottle back into his chaps pocket, and his attempted chuckle had the sound of a death rattle in his thick-muscled throat.

"I'll just call you on that, Wingy. Me 'n' Lute and Lorne will go along."

"I knowed you'd git sense." Wingy grinned at him, his blue eyes the color of clear, new ice.

Nevada called to Bowie to ride back and help him fetch the horses they had tied back yonder, and get the wounded Bench T man back here to the cabin.

"Eli," said Nevada as they rode back along the trail together, "don't know that Blackie Traverse is dead. You picked up what he said about Blackie cookin' dinner. He wasn't tryin' to cover up nothin'. And he wasn't su'prised to see you alive, neither. Savvy what I'm drivin' at?"

Bowie nodded. Nevada lifted his drooping white mustache and spat thoughtfully.

"Whoever killed Blackie is keepin' their mouth shut about it, and we'll let 'er go at that. Our play is to lay low and say nothin' and keep plenty watchful. Let Eli think Blackie got killed while me 'n' you was playin' hell diver. And speakin' of hell divers, son, I'm obliged to you. Some men's bin struck at and missed by lightnin' and it leaves 'em scairt as hell whenever thunder rolls and the lightnin' pops. I'm that way about water that's more than hock-deep. Almost drowned once, when I was a kid, and swimmin' water chills the guts in me. I ain't forgettin', Bowie, that you saved my life back yonder."

Bowie felt uncomfortable when Nevada looked at him with all the steely glint gone from his gray eyes, leaving them warm and friendly and offering a friendship that the young cowboy knew the old cowpuncher gave to mighty few men.

They put the wounded man on his horse after Nevada tied a tight tourniquet made from a hogging string around the bullet rip in the Bench T man's thigh. Then they rode on to where the six head of horses were tied.

"This is goin' to be the dangedest outfit," Nevada told Bowie, "that ever taken the long trail north."

And Bowie knew that the little dried-up, bow-legged cowpuncher was voicing a prophecy. Because even before the herd was gathered there were hatreds and cross hatreds and a tangle of ugly black suspicions. And there was bound to be that memory of another trail herd Wingy Carr had left the San Saba with, the herd that had vanished with all its men save Wingy Carr. And that vanished trail herd had built up hatreds that must some day be wiped out with blazing guns.

"We brand all the cattle in my road iron," Wingy Carr told Bowie and the three Traverses. He grinned like a gray wolf and pointed with his hook toward the corral cattle. "Every last head goes into the Arrow road brand. The Arrow pointin' north."

V.

Thorny brush and sweat and wild cattle. Brown Mexican frijole beans and beef and canned tomatoes. Unshaved men and leg-weary horses. Cussing and sweating. Working the open country by daylight and laying in wait of a moonlit night for the wild uns to come out of the thorny, impenetrable bosques to eat. Roping the big steers and tying 'em down. Necking 'em to big gentle oxen that would lead 'em eventually to the salt-lick corrals. Hazing 'em into the blind, brushy wings of trap corrals and throwing 'em in with gentle cattle to tame 'em down so they wouldn't stampede at the sight of a man. Cussing and roping and the sweat salting the deep scratches torn in a man's hide by the thorny brush of the thick bosques. After days like that the men were too played out at night to quarrel. And not a drop of whiskey in camp.

They cut back cows and calves and the weak stuff. Bowie and the Traverses got a decent price for the culls that were cut back because other ranchers were only too anxious to buy them out and get rid of the Traverses. And those who had no cash money to buy cows and calves and yearlings swapped grub and wagons and all manner of stuff for the livestock. Bowie got a pair of new boots and a couple of almost new hats, a pair of chaps, a good saddle and pack saddle, enough shirts, and a pair of new pants, a pair of silver-mounted spurs and fifteen head of good cow horses besides some cash money for his cows and calves and a ten-year lease on the ranch he reckoned he would never see again but hated to sell because he had been born there and his mother was buried there and the place held a thousand memories for him.

There were twenty-five hundred head of cattle in the Arrow road iron when the roundup along both sides of the San Saba was finally completed and the cattle branded out at the Burdett and Traverse corrals. Nearly seven hundred head were BB cattle and better than thirteen hundred head were in the Traverse Bench T iron. The rest were strays that Wingy either bought for five dollars a head or claimed by right of possession and backed his claim with his six-shooter and Winchester and his sharp steel hook.

The tires on the mess wagon and bed wagon were reset by the blacksmith at Menard, and Eli had the smithy rig a platform on behind the bed wagon that would hold a barrel of his best whiskey. The night

before the outfit started up the trail, Eli Traverse dealt free drinks to all the outfit and sold the saloon and what booze was left to the storekeeper across the street. The men celebrated till the crack of dawn, when they moved the big herd off the bed ground and headed north. With a herd of twenty-five hundred head of cattle, a remuda of three hundred head of horses, and a crew of thirteen men, counting the trail boss, Wingy Carr, a cook, a horse wrangler, and a night hawk for the remuda.

Wingy had six men, counting Nevada. The three Traverse brothers fetched along two Bench T cowpunchers. And there was Bowie Burdett.

The night before they pulled out, Eli Traverse, a little drunker than usual as he worked behind his bar for the last time, grinned at Bowie, who, with Nevada, was the only man in the outfit who was sober.

"Lorne and Lute figger you killed Blackie. I got a notion you didn't. You wouldn't want to be talkin' one way or the other before we start the trail, Bowie?"

"I didn't kill Blackie," Bowie told him bluntly. "But I ain't sorry that the big son is dead."

"Then he *is* dead?" chuckled Eli, as if he'd caught Bowie in a trap of some kind.

"That seems to be the general opinion, Eli," Bowie gave him a quick reply. "I ain't the one to argue the question one way or the other."

Nevada moved alongside Bowie at the bar and Eli dropped the question. Nevada and Bowie left town before midnight and rode to camp. There was a trail herd to hold, and they went on guard with Sandy and Chick, who were riding out to relieve Herb and Slim and Buck and the two Bench T men, who were riding around the bedded herd.

"Who do you reckon killed Blackie?" Bowie asked Nevada as they rode around the bedded steers. "I'd give a purty to know for sure."

"It'll come out at the proper time," was all that Nevada would say. Bowie got the notion somehow that the little old cowpuncher knew, and that Nevada was holding back the information for some purpose of his own.

The outfit pulled out at daybreak. Wagons creaking, horse bells jingling, cowboys mostly a little drunk and singing or calling out loud remarks.

The cattle strung out, and Wingy and Eli Traverse rode up on the point, one on either side of the strung-out leaders.

Nevada and Bowie rode swing behind Wingy. Lute and Lorne rode the swing positions behind Eli. The others strung along behind and bringing up the drags. Those were to be their positions from now on up the trail. Every man in the outfit was fired by excitement that he held in check or let go in song or joshing that went back and forth.

Wingy Carr had given them a curt, brief talk when they were all at camp.

"Some of you men has grudges," he said bluntly. "Fight 'em out here and now or else forget 'em. Because if this trail herd is goin' to git anywheres, every last man in the outfit has got to stick together. You'll all take your orders from me, and you'll obey 'em, regardless. I'm the boss, and any man that thinks I ain't had better come out right now and we'll settle the matter. You'll stick together and side one another if trouble crowds us. And it will. Is there any man in this outfit that don't like it?" His cold blue eyes swept the faces of every man.

Nobody said a word. They nodded, and that was all. Wingy Carr was the trail boss of the Arrow outfit.

But before they crossed the Colorado River, fifty miles north at Waldrip, Bowie knew that Lute and Lorne were fixing to double up on him and prod him into a gun fight. Eli still treated him with that big-mouthed false friendliness.

Then Nevada dropped a single remark that was heard by nobody but the three Traverse brothers.

"Anybody that gits to shovin' Bowie Burdett around has got me to kill."

The two younger Traverse boys let Bowie alone after that until the herd got as far as Seymour, Texas, where they crossed the Brazos. It was about two hundred miles up the long trail from the San Saba.

Lorne and Lute got a little drunk at Seymour, and they both jumped Bowie at the same time. But Wingy stepped in. His hook yanked Lute by the back of his shirt and flung him clear across the bar. Bowie knocked Lorne down with a wild haymaker. Nevada shoved a gun in Eli's kidneys and told him he'd blow a hole as big as his hat in him if he even looked like he didn't love Bowie like a brother.

"You killed Blackie, you tow-headed son!" Lorne snarled at Bowie as he spat blood from his smashed mouth.

"Supposin' he did kill Blackie?" snapped Wingy. "If I was you Traverses I'd not be claimin' any kind of shirt-tail kin to a drygulchin' breed. The next time you Traverses jump young Burdett I'll rip your guts out!" He swung his sharp steel hook wickedly.

"Belly up to the bar, you Arrow sons, and everybody have a horn. We're pullin' out at daybreak for Doan's Crossin' on the Red."

They had hardly finished their drinks when four hard-looking strangers came into the saloon, bell spurs jingling and their hats slanted and their hands on their guns. They gave no warning. Nor did Wingy Carr and Nevada need warning. Before Bowie had even gotten a good look at the four men their guns were spitting. And in less than half a dozen seconds the four strangers were sprawled on the floor in pools of their own blood, and Wingy and Nevada were reloading their empty, smoking six-shooters.

A bullet had clipped Wingy's lean ribs and there was a hole through Nevada's hat, but outside of that the four strangers had been killed before their guns could do any damage.

Wingy and Nevada looked at one another and grinned faintly as if they shared some secret.

Eli Traverse broke the silence that followed the last echoes of the roaring guns. His voice sounded as harsh as a crow's.

"That long feller looks a hell of a lot like a man we called Muddy who went up the trail with Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett two years ago!"

"That's the feller you called Muddy"—Wingy Carr shoved fresh cartridges in his six-shooter—"but his name is mud now." And he grinned wolfishly at his own lame joke, his cold blue eyes fastened on the three Traverse brothers.

Muddy had worked for the Bench T before he started up the trail two years ago, and Bowie remembered the man. He remembered, too, how his father had once said that Muddy was part Cherokee and came from the Indian nation on the north side of the Red, and that Muddy was bad medicine in the Injun language, and as crooked and ornery as snake tracks.

Then Nevada did something that puzzled Bowie and gave him a sort of sickish feeling inside, and it was not until later that he made any kind of explanation for what he did. He rolled the four dead men over on their backs and frisked their pockets with swift thoroughness. He was not robbing their pockets because what he took from them he piled alongside their dead bodies. Rather, he was searching for something. He kept a tally book and a jackknife with a homemade wooden handle that he took from Muddy's pockets.

Eli's covetous green eyes looked at the four piles of silver and currency alongside the dead bodies. Wingy's voice, when he spoke, was as sharp as a whiplash.

"I told you Traverses when we started that this outfit would have to stick together and forget their picayune feudin'. That goes double from here on. Them four dead uns is part of the rustler gang that rides the Red River from over west of Childress, where the Potter and Bacon Trail crosses the Red to Fannin County. There's a two-hundred-mile strip along the north side of the Red in the Indian Territory that's called No Man's Land. There ain't no more law along that strip than there is in hell, and unless you want to lose this herd like Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett lost theirn, you'll stick together closer'n cockleburs. Me 'n' Nevada just cut down four of 'em that drifted here to smell around and take back the news concernin' the size of our herd and how many men they got to wipe out to git it. Them four rustler scouts ain't in any shape to carry back the news. Now fork your town horses and git back to camp."

Nevada held the wooden-handled jackknife he had taken from Muddy's pocket, turning it over in the palm of his hand. He handed it to Eli Traverse. His steely eyes watched Eli's face.

"Whoever made the handle on this Barlow knife got fancy and whittled his brand on it," he remarked. "Bench T."

"I mind the day the Old Man made that handle," said Eli. "This jackknife belonged to Hank Traverse." His tone sounded strained, uneasy.

"The knife was in Muddy's pocket," said Wingy, watching Eli. "That might mean one of two things. Either Hank Traverse is dead and Muddy robbed his pockets, or Hank is alive and mebbeso swapped knives with Muddy." He turned to the saloon man.

"There's money on the floor to pay for the plantin' of them four carcasses. And you'll keep your mouth shut, or the next time I git to this cow town of Seymour, I'll slip this hook into you. Let's go, men!"

Wingy doubled the beef guard that night and put on three men to help night-hawk the remuda. Before daybreak the wagons were rolling and the herd was moving up the trail toward Doan's Crossing on the Red River.

VI.

The Arrow outfit laid over at Doan's Crossing to rest the cattle and give the men a chance to shoe up their horses. They had given the little cow town of Vernon, a few miles south of the Red, a few hours' play, and then Wingy had gotten them out of town and back to camp because he said it was here that Hank Traverse and B. B. Burdett had made their fatal mistake of splitting their herd. Wingy was expecting trouble, and Nevada told Bowie that trouble was bound to come because Wingy Carr was throwing a challenge direct at the rustlers who roamed No Man's Land.

Wingy and Nevada had laid aside whatever feud they had and were working together like a team. That shooting scrape back at Seymour had accomplished something that Bowie couldn't understand, and he knew better than to question Nevada, who was just about as close to him as any man except his own father had ever been.

A man driving a span of grain-fed mules hooked to a yellow buckboard drove up to camp and shook hands with Wingy and Nevada. There was a barrel of whiskey roped to the buckboard, and it had a spigot, and there was a box filled with shiny tin cups.

"We got our own barrel of likker there on the bed wagon, McCoy," Wingy told him. "My men ain't drinkin' no other brand. You're wastin' your time. I'm bossin' this trail herd, and it's goin' north by the way of Dodge. I ain't forgettin' what happened the last time you showed up here at Doan's Crossin'. Between you and that whiskey-peddlin'

honkatonk bunch from Dodge City you split my trail herd. And what the hell happened? There's Bench T and BB cattle still strayin'. Hank Traverse is dead and buried a day's ride from here on the Western Trail. That woman called Big Casino had a slab with Hank's name carved on it put there to mark his grave. And over east, on the Chisholm Trail to your shippin' point of Abilene there's a big pile of rocks that mark Ben Burdett's grave. Them Bench T cattle never got as far as Dodge City, and the BB steers never reached Abilene. That split herd was pickin's for the rustlers of No Man's Land. And there's men like Nevada here who would still gamble their last dollar that Wingy Carr had a hand in it. You tap that whiskey keg of yourn, McCoy, and I'll rip you with my hook. You ner that Dodge City bunch ain't splittin' no more Arrow trail herds."

Joe McCoy nodded. "I'll take a drink of that likker of yours, Wingy. And I'll tell you this much. I lost more than you or Hank Traverse or Ben Burdett lost when that trail herd split two years ago. Because no trail drover has had the guts to swing east along the new trail I've laid out to Abilene, and I've been accused of everything from the killing of Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett to hiring men to gather that scattered herd and ship them. So I've got a cattle inspector at Abilene who has orders to take no cattle in the Arrow iron. I didn't drive here to sell you a big windy talk on Abilene, Wingy."

"Then what in hell fetched you here, McCoy?" Wingy demanded bluntly.

"I got word that Hank Traverse's three sons and the son of Ben Burdett were taking a big trail herd north and that Wingy Carr was trail boss and Nevada was working as top hand with the trail outfit. I thought they might be interested in a little information regarding Hank Traverse and Ben Burdett. Information I picked up first hand. It concerns the two graves rather than the men themselves. Which are the Traverse brothers, and am I right in guessing that the young tow-headed cowboy is Bowie Burdett?"

Wingy's hook pointed out the three Traverse brothers. "That is Eli with the bartender's mustache and belly. That's Lute with the two six-shooters. The one with the busted nose is Lorne. You done read Bowie's brand. Spittin' image of B. B. as he looked twenty-five years ago. Unload your news, McCoy."

Joe McCoy smiled faintly and nodded. He looked at the three Traverses.

"I took the trouble to visit that grave that Big Casino marked with the slab bearing Hank Traverse's name. I took a pick and shovel along an' dug up the grave. I found the bones and hide of a steer that wore the Bench T brand and the Arrow road brand."

"The devil you say!" Eli Traverse slid a quick look at Lute and Lorne, and his right hand closed over the butt of his gun.

Nevada stepped over in front of Joe McCoy with the six-shooter he had been cleaning in his hand. His steel-gray eyes were fixed on the three Traverse brothers, and his voice was a lazy drawl when he broke the tense silence.

"Seems to me, Eli, that you boys is takin' good news in a mighty queer way. Joe McCoy just told you that Hank Traverse ain't fillin' that grave that Big Casino marked so lovin'ly. Might be that your daddy ain't as dead as most folks think he is. Better simmer down, Eli. You're actin' almighty queer."

"It's a kind o' shock, that's all," muttered Eli. "And it was almost like this McCoy feller was makin' a liar out o' our Old Man. Like he was insultin' a dead man."

"Hank Traverse," said Wingy, his blue eyes hard and watchful, "liked to play jokes thataway. Eli comes by his hoorawin' ways natural. If Hank's alive, he shore did job me aplenty. Keep a-talkin', McCoy, and mebbeso I'll change my mind and have a drink out o' your keg."

Joe McCoy smiled slowly at Wingy, and his smile widened to a grin as he looked at Nevada. Nevada spread his white mustache and spat tobacco juice at the ground.

McCoy's glance swung directly at Bowie, and the young cowboy liked the frankness of the man's eyes and his smile. He could tell that Joe McCoy was as honest and straightforward as any man he had ever met.

"I looked under that pile of rocks on the Chisholm Trail between here and the Canadian River, Bowie," McCoy said soberly. "Ben Burdett is buried there. There's no doubt about his identity. I hate to give you this bad news. Ben Burdett was the first man to take stock in my contention that Abilene was the natural shipping point for Texas longhorns. He was murdered, an' his BB cattle were stolen. Those rocks mark the grave of a friend and a brave man. I'd like to shake hands with the son he named after his old friend and boyhood hero of the Alamo, Colonel Jim Bowie."

Joe McCoy stepped around Nevada with his hand extended, and Bowie gripped it, feeling self-conscious and embarrassed.

"That's one way of gettin' BB cattle up the Abilene Trail," said Wingy, but his tone was not as sharp as Bowie expected. "Hand shakin' beats whiskey when young Burdett never drinks nothin' but crick water."

Nevada walked over to the back of McCoy's yellow buckboard and took one of the shiny tin cups from the box. He held it under the spigot until the cup was half filled. Then he downed it in a couple of quick gulps that bobbed the Adam's apple in his leathery neck up and down like a cork.

"Don't mind if I do," said Wingy, and he, too, took a drink from Joe McCoy's keg.

Wingy's men and the two Bench T cowpunchers were on day herd. There were only the cook and the three Traverse brothers and Bowie and Nevada and Wingy in camp. The cook was lifting his Dutch-oven covers with his long pot hook. He was a giant Negro, black as his Dutch ovens. Wingy filled a tin cup and handed it to him.

"Drink hearty, Snowball. And don't burn the bread or I'll rip red rivers in that hide of yourn."

Lute and Lorne looked at their older brother, and Eli shook his head and walked over to where his saddled horse stood, bridle reins trailing. He got on his horse and rode off toward the grazing cattle. Lute and Lorne followed him.

"The Traverses," said Wingy with a grin, "have rode out yonder for a medicine talk." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Mexican peso which he held toward Nevada.

Nevada grinned and took the peso, pocketing it. Bowie watched them, puzzled.

"Nevada bet me his top horse agin' a Mexican dobe peso that Hank Traverse was alive and that his three sons knowed it," Wingy explained. "I just paid the bet. You'll guarantee a good price for these cattle at the Chicago market if we ship 'em at Abilene, McCoy?"

"I'll guarantee top price, Wingy. The cattle cars will be ready. I've got stockyards and loading pens and chutes built at Abilene. There's money in the bank to pay cash for any losses you suffer after the cattle reach the shipping pens. I'll put it down in black and white. And if you need more men to help you up the trail I'll furnish 'em."

"I got all the men I need," said Wingy. He turned to Nevada, and his teeth bared in a grin.

"It's goin' to be a hell of a jolt to the Traverse brothers when they learn for certain that the Arrow herd is goin' to Abilene instead of Dodge City."

"You'll split the herd here, then?" questioned Joe McCoy.

"Split, hell!" Wingy said. "These cattle are all in the Arrow road iron. No man cuts my herd without usin' a gun to git the job done. This Arrow herd goes to Abilene!"

Wingy Carr and Joe McCoy had a drink together and shook hands to bind the deal, and after a little while McCoy drove away in his newly painted yellow buckboard, his slick-looking mules headed east and north to follow the new trail his men had located and marked with stone piles and plow furrows. The trail that was to swing the big herds coming out of Texas toward Abilene. Toward Abilene meant away from Dodge City, and there was bitterness and bloodshed already to furnish fuel to the red fires of jealousy and rivalry between the two cow towns.

Wingy Carr had acted almighty high-handed in making that agreement with Joe McCoy from Abilene, Bowie knew. Wingy claimed all the strays in the herd and was collecting his pay as trail boss from the money Bowie and the Traverses would get for their steers. But he had no real right to name the Abilene Trail, and he knew it. Bowie and the Traverses owned the bulk of the herd.

Wingy Carr had known all along that Joe McCoy would meet them at Doan's Crossing. But Bowie somehow got the notion that the one-armed trail boss had not made any decision about which route he wanted to take until McCoy had made that talk about the two graves. And even then it had been Eli Traverse's actions that had prompted his decision. And Bowie knew that somehow this little old cowpuncher Nevada had something to do with it. And that Wingy Carr and Nevada were holding back something that they had argued about to the point of bitter quarreling that had hardened to a sort of silent, watchful enmity.

Wingy Carr had been watching the skyline to the north, and he grinned mirthlessly at Nevada and pointed with his hook.

"There'll be company for supper, Snowball.

Fancy company from Dodge City. Big Casino's favorite roundup bait is a son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack."

A son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack is a steamed tallow pudding with a lot of raisins in it. The big Negro nodded and chuckled and showed his ivory-white teeth.

"Big Casino," Wingy said to Bowie, "will be makin' yonder dust cloud. She's reppin' for Dodge City. But she's gittin' here too late. We're takin' the Abilene Trail, regardless. The Traverses are goin' to rear over backward and hell's likely to pop. It'll be you and me and Nevada agin' the Traverse boys. They got two tough hands, and if a man kin take Nevada's word fer it, Hank Traverse and some more rustlers like that Muddy feller will be ridin' to side 'em. But I got Sandy and Chick and Herb and Slim and Buck, and they'll not weaken in a tight. And that's the way things stand right now."

Wingy turned to Nevada. "You didn't act su'-prised when Joe McCoy told what was buried in them two graves?"

"I was with Joe McCoy when he dug 'em up," said Nevada.

And once again Bowie Burdett saw that swift, steellike clash of blue eyes and gray eyes. Rapiers crossing, then sliding slowly back into leather sheaths.

VII.

Big Casino was the handsomest woman Bowie had ever seen. Tall and statuesque, with hair the color of bronze in the slanting light of the setting sun. She drove a fine team of chestnut sorrels hooked to a new buggy that had red wheels and a shiny black-leather top, and she handled them with expert hand.

A canvas-covered light democrat wagon drawn by four Spanish mules with roached manes and broom-cut tails pulled up behind her. It held half a dozen members of her stringed band dressed in gaudy silk shirts and pants tucked in the tops of fancy-stitched, high-heeled boots.

A girl in fringed and beaded buckskin blouse and divided skirt and a black Stetson angled across a mop of dull-gold curls handled the lines expertly, and her booted foot braked the wagon to a halt as she pulled up with a flourish. She was young, and her skin was tanned, and she belonged outdoors. She didn't look as though she belonged in Dodge City's honkatonks.

A Negro cook drove the four mules hitched to the combined chuck and bed wagon. There was a keg of whiskey on the side of the wagon.

One of the Bench T cowboys took the chestnut team as Big Casino cramped the buggy wheel and stepped down, pulling off her gauntlet glove and holding out her white hand to Eli Traverse.

"I bet you're Eli." She smiled. "And this is Lute and Lorne." Her yellow eyes were giving them some sort of message. Her voice was husky, throaty.

She made no attempt to shake hands with Wingy Carr, and the

"This herd goes to Abilene —and any man thinks different had better come gunnin'!"

glance she gave Nevada held a glint of hatred and suspicion.

The stringed band was playing, and the musicians were singing the words to the tune of "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." Somehow the sound of music out here on the open range made a man's blood pound. Bowie was staring at the buckskin girl on the driver's seat of the covered wagon. She saw him and smiled, and his face reddened.

Then Big Casino was walking up to him, holding out her hand. Her red lips were smiling, her yellow eyes watching his confusion as he tore his gaze from the girl in buckskin.

"You must be Bowie Burdett. You're a handsome youngster."

Before he was aware of her intentions she had led him over to the covered wagon.

"Kit, this is Bowie Burdett. Be sweet to him."

The girl smiled down at Bowie and held out a buckskin-gauntleted hand. Bowie held to it as she jumped lightly down over the wagon wheel and stood close to him, her tanned cheeks flushed, her hand tightening in his. Her violet-gray eyes were frank and friendly.

"As well mated"—Big Casino's voice was loud and coarse—"as a team of buckskin-maned colts!"

Even Wingy and Nevada got a chuckle out of Bowie's red-faced confusion, and he was in for some good-natured joshing. But he didn't mind so much, at that. There were worse things could happen to a man than being rawhided about a pretty girl.

It was the ugly, grating sound of Lorne Traverse's laugh that turned Bowie's clumsy embarrassment to tense-muscled, taut-nerved, white-hot anger. There was something insulting about that sneering, mirthless, mocking laugh that sounded above the meaningless banter of the other men and grated raspingly through the music of the string band.

Lorne took a couple of long-legged strides and grabbed the girl in the fringe buckskins. She fought him, small fists beating with puny futility at his face. She was helpless in Lorne's powerful grip, and with a drunken laugh at her protests he started to carry her away.

Bowie started after Lorne. Lute got in his way and Wingy's hook grabbed Lute and flung him backward. Nevada rapped Lute along the jaw with the barrel of his six-shooter, and Wingy whirled and kicked Eli under the chin and spun around and caught Eli's heavy flannel shirt collar with the steel hook. His right fist thudded into Eli's face.

Bowie saw those things happen in split seconds. He yelled at Lorne and Lorne whirled around, still holding the struggling girl with his left arm. The gun in Lorne's right hand belched flame, and the heavy lead slug burned Bowie's ribs like a red-hot branding iron. Bowie had his gun in his hand, and the distance between him and Lorne was about fifty feet. But Lorne was holding the girl in front of him as a shield and Bowie dared not shoot. He saw the leering, ugly grin on Lorne's face that was now grayish-white under its tan. Lorne's six-shooter barrel was lifted at an upward angle. He was letting the weight of the gun and the pressure of his thumb cock and pull the gun down to the line of direct aim. And his voice was harsh and shrill.

"I'll finish the job that me 'n' Blackie tried back home. I killed Blackie by mistake, and I'm makin' 'er up to him—"

The buckskin girl got an arm free. Her hand grabbed Lorne's shirt sleeve and yanked, jerking down Lorne's gun hand. The gun roared and the bullet tore a furrow in the dust just in front of Bowie.

The girl sank her teeth in Lorne's shoulder, and he threw her aside with a curse. As his gun swung back into position, Bowie pulled up short, and his six-shooter spewed flame. Lorne swayed on his feet and Bowie's next bullet made Lorne's knees buckle. Lorne's bullet went past Bowie's head. Bowie shot once more, and Lorne's gray-white face jerked a little and his open mouth was a smear of blood. He was dead when he fell forward on his knees and slumped in a heap, still gripping his smoking six-shooter.

Bowie stood there, his long legs wide-spread and his smoking gun in his hand, staring down at Lorne's blood-smeared, lifeless body. His white-hot anger was suddenly gone, and he felt sick.

He heard Nevada call his name sharply. Fighting off the wave of weak nausea, he turned around. Nevada was standing there with a gun in his hand and one of the Bench T cowpunchers was sitting on the ground, swaying back and forth and cursing, his left hand holding a bullet-mangled right hand. Sandy and Chick had Lute covered. Herb and Slim had the other Bench T cowboy backed against the chuck wagon, with his hands in the air and a scared look on his face. Wingy's hook was fastened to Eli Traverse's thick bull neck, and there was a little trickle of blood where the sharp point was tightened with a warning pressure. One swift little yank and the steel hook would rip open Eli's jugular vein.

"Snowball," said Nevada, his voice almost too calm and steady to be real, "fetch Bowie a cup of likker. Rattle your hocks."

Wingy was looking at Big Casino, who had ducked in back of her top buggy when the shooting started. She had pulled a sawed-off shotgun from behind the seat cushion, and her yellow eyes were glittering like a she cougar's.

Wingy motioned with his six-shooter, and his grin was wolfish.

"You'd only blow the belly off Eli if you used that scattergun, ma'am. Drop it or I'll shoot you loose from it. I ain't foolin' none, either."

"Put 'er away," croaked Eli. His mouth and nose were streaming blood so that his heavy red mustache was clotted with it, and his voice came through a blood-soaked screen. "He'll kill me, shore as hell!"

Big Casino put the sawed-off shotgun back on the buggy seat, and there was contempt and scorn in her eyes as she looked at Eli, then at the cowed and beaten Lute.

"Hank Traverse might be a curly wolf," she said disgustedly, "but his whelps are yellow-bellied coyotes. Pick up the marbles, Wingy. It's your game."

She took a leather-covered flask with a silver-cup top from the pocket of her riding skirt, and her white hands were steady as she poured herself a drink of brandy and downed it.

She called to her frightened cowboy band. They had dived into the shelter of their covered wagon at the first shot.

"Hook up your team, you bold, bad fiddlers. Get my buggy team hooked up. We're goin' on to Dodge City."

Her yellow eyes swung from Wingy to Nevada, and if looks could have killed, that little old dried-up cowpuncher's bowed legs would have bent and he would have dropped dead in his tracks.

Nevada met her withering stare with a spark of hidden laughter in his steely eyes. He lifted his white mustache with his two fingers and spat tobacco juice at the ground.

"Joe McCoy's hired man!" she said, as if she were calling Nevada some filthy name. And her yellow eyes slid back to Wingy Carr.

"Did Nevada ever show you the pretty badge he wears pinned to his undershirt?"

The girl in buckskin had come up behind Bowie. He felt her hand on his sleeve and looked down at her. He had downed the tin cup half filled with whiskey that Snowball had handed him, and the liquor had warmed the icy emptiness in the pit of his stomach. The girl was trying to smile, and her lips were quivering and her violet eyes were still dark with fright.

"I nearly got you killed." Her voice was small and almost inaudible.

"You mean"—Bowie forced a grin—"you saved my life. I had to fight 'er out with Lorne Traverse sooner or later."

Big Casino saw the buckskin girl, and her upper lip curled back in a catlike snarl.

"You little fool. You're fired! You can walk back to Dodge City."

"No, ma'am," grinned Bowie. It must have been that big jolt of whiskey that made him bold enough to talk up to that bronze-haired queen of Dodge City's honkatonks. "She ain't afoot if she knows how to ride a horse. And she's not goin' back to Dodge City. She's travelin' with the Arrow trail herd to Abilene."

"Praise de Lawdy!" Snowball's ivory teeth flashed against the black ebony of his grinning face. "Ol' son-of-a-gun-in-de-sack ain't plumb wasted!"

Wingy had released Eli. He prodded him in the back with the hook and motioned to Sandy and Chick to let Lute go.

"Load Lorne Traverse in her band wagon, Eli. Git that hired man of yourn to lend you a hand. The other un had better git Big Casino to tie up that hand of his. Nevada busted it with a bullet when he tried to side Lorne and shoot Bowie Burdett in the back. You Traverses kin cut your horses out o' the remuda and hit the trail to wherever Hank Traverse is camped, which I reckon ain't too far away. But you kin tell Hank Traverse that he ain't cuttin' ary Bench T steers out o' this Arrow trail herd that's goin' to Abilene unless he cuts 'em with a Winchester. Got anything to add to that, Nevada?"

"Yeah. Tell Hank that the law is backin' Wingy Carr's play. But Big Casino kin mebbeso tell him more about that."

Nevada reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a metal badge. He polished it on his sleeve and pinned it to his faded blue flannel shirt. Wingy grinned faintly at his tough cowhands and said nothing.

The buckskin girl walked past Big Casino and over to the covered wagon. She reached inside and took a small-calibered rifle in an Indian-made buckskin scabbard from under the wagon seat. Also a cartridge belt and two holstered, pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooters. Then a silver-mounted, carved-leather saddle and bridle and bright-colored Navaho saddle blanket. And a canvas sack that was a little bulky but light of weight.

"And until you see her toss them glass balls in the air and bust 'em with them fancy guns," Nevada said to Bowie, who was watching the girl in wide-eyed bewilderment, "you just ain't never seen fancy shootin'. I seen her at Abilene and at Dodge City, when her and her daddy had their Wild West show there. I heard somewhere that a bronc killed her daddy. Like as not, she got left stranded at Dodge and Big Casino hired her to come along with her band. She's no honkatonk girl, son. She's straight as she looks. A cowman's daughter."

The buckskin girl put her saddle and bag of glass balls and her target rifle on the ground. She buckled on the carved belt and two pearl-handled guns. She had to look up a little because she was a lot smaller than Big Casino.

"You owe me fifty dollars wages," she spoke out in a clear, unfrightened voice. "And it's costing you another fifty for calling me a little fool. The shells in my guns are loaded with bird shot. Unless you want to find out how it feels to be stung by a swarm

of hornets, you'll pay me. One hundred dollars, lady."

Big Casino glared at the girl whose mop of golden curls made her look a lot younger than her nineteen years. Then she took a roll of bills from her pocket and counted out a hundred dollars.

Eli and Lute rolled Lorne's body in his bed tarp and loaded it into the covered wagon. Then Eli growled something at Lute and the uninjured Bench T cowpuncher, and they went over to where the remuda was held inside the rope corral. They were cutting their Bench T horses. Quitting the outfit.

"I shore guessed wrong about who killed Blackie that evenin'," Nevada said to Bowie. Wingy was standing there listening. "It was Lorne. He was spooked, and mebbeso full of whiskey to make him brave, and he mistook Blackie fer you." Nevada turned to Wingy.

"I knowed you was aimin' to git the BB and Bench T cattle, Wingy. And I knowed that you wouldn't stop at a killin' or two to get them steers. So I had it figured you'd planted Blackie and one of your tough hands at the Burdett place to throw a scare into Bowie. And they got excited and bungled it and your man killed Blackie to shut his mouth. I had you figgered wrong, and I'm admittin' it."

Wingy looked at the law badge pinned to Nevada's shirt and grinned faintly.

"You're a hell of a policeman," he said flatly, and walked over to where the Buckskin girl was sipping a cup of black coffee Snowball had given her.

"Anybody eatin' my grub has got to make a hand," Bowie heard him tell the girl. "You'll go on horse guard when you've had your supper. Bowie'll ketch you a horse and go out with you. But don't go shootin' at the stars and boogerin' them steers, or you'll find out you ain't too old to git a old-fashioned spankin'." His voice softened so that he didn't sound like Wingy Carr. "I knowed the colonel. Knowed him and your mammy when you was a yearlin' down at Laredo. Now tackle a bait of that son-of-a-gun before Snowball busts down a-bawlin'."

Wingy's right hand gripped the girl's buckskin shoulder, and Bowie had a notion that the girl's eyes were misted with tears as she looked up into the weather-beaten face of the tough one-armed trail boss.

Nevada poked Bowie roughly in the ribs with his thumb. "She's as lonesome-lookin' as a mammyless calf at a roundup. Git over there and ride herd on 'er. Her daddy was Colonel Dawson, and she was named Kit after Kit Carson— What the devil! You shot, button?"

Nevada was looking at the hand that had poked Bowie's ribs. There was blood on it. And the side of Bowie's flannel shirt was wet with it. Bowie grinned a little.

"Lorne nicked me, I reckon. It don't hurt. Just busted the hide."

Nevada led him over behind the bed wagon and made him peel off his shirt and undershirt. He fussed over Bowie like a hen with one chick and motioned Kit Dawson over, chuckling at Bowie's tongue-tied embarrassment. Then Kit laughed, and Bowie's embarrassment left him. They washed the bullet rip with raw whiskey that stung like liquid fire, and the girl ripped Snowball's cleanest flour-sack dish towel into strips and bandaged his ribs.

Big Casino and her cowboy band and chuck wagon had pulled out. Wingy's tough cowhands made awkward attempts to make the buckskin girl feel like she belonged here at the trail camp. Bowie caught her his pet horse, and the moon was rising when they rode out together on horse guard. The girl Kit and the boy Bowie. Both named after men who had made frontier history. Talking together as if they had known one another from childhood.

VIII.

Later, Nevada rode out to the remuda where Bowie and Kit were on horse guard. With him were half a dozen men Bowie had never seen before.

"Joe McCoy sent 'em," Nevada told Bowie. "There's eight or ten more of 'em. Wingy taken 'em out to guard the cattle. They're kind o' deputies, and they're takin' my orders. The Cattle Raisers Association of Texas pinned this badge on me, son, after I give 'em a report of what happened to the last BB cattle that went up the trail. McCoy has bin helpin' from Abilene, and Bat Masterson, the marshal at Dodge City, has bin lendin' what help he could. We're wipin' out the rustlers and makin' both the Dodge City and Abilene trails safe. The little Kit Carson lady fetched me a note from Bat Masterson sayin' that Big Casino was workin' in with Hank Traverse to raid the trail herds when they leave Doan's Crossin'. There's three of his men at camp now. They cold-trailed Big Casino. She's hittin' the trail back to Dodge City, quittin' the Traverses because she don't back losers.

"But Eli and Lute has gone back to Menard on the Texas side of the Red. And it looks like they're meetin' Hank Traverse there to make medicine and mebbeso figger 'er out to stampede the herd tonight and run off the remuda. So we're beatin' 'em to it. Me 'n' Wingy and the boys is ridin' back to Menard and fightin' 'er out there with Hank Traverse's rustlers. Hank killed yore daddy, and his three sons knowed it all along. They've bin crowdin' you around for a couple of years, rustlin' your BB cattle and tryin' to prod you into a gunplay. You killed Lorne and your job is done, Bowie. Me and Wingy Carr will 'tend to the handlin' of Hank Traverse and his other two whelps. You're in charge of the Arrow trail herd. It's your outfit

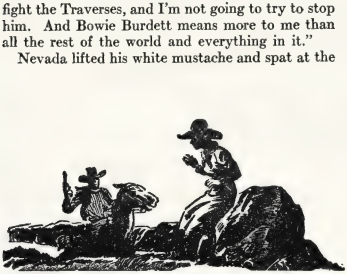
from here on if anything happens to Wingy Carr tonight."

"Hank Traverse killed my father," Bowie said stubbornly. "Eli and Lute have bin handin' me more than any man wants to take. I'm goin' to Menard. I've got to go. I couldn't call myself a man otherwise. B. B. Burdett was my daddy, and he'd want it thataway. I'm goin' to Menard with you."

Nevada looked at Kit, and the little buckskin girl smiled and shook her head.

"Maybe it's just the moon, Nevada," she said shyly, "but Bowie and I have decided that we're in love. We're going to get married at Abilene. But I know how he feels about going to Menard to fight the Traverses, and I'm not going to try to stop him. And Bowie Burdett means more to me than all the rest of the world and everything in it."

Nevada lifted his white mustache and spat at the



ground. His gray eyes studied the young couple, and he nodded his grizzled head.

"I reckon that's what Wingy meant when he said I'd have you both to lick. You're shore game young uns. I'll send Bowie back to you all in one hunk or bust a hame string a-tryin', young lady."

Then Nevada chuckled and changed the subject a little. "You should've seen Wingy Carr's eyes booger out when all them deputies from Dodge and Abilene showed up. Fer a second my life wasn't worth a lead dollar. Ever since I throwed in with him some months ago he's bin suspectin' I had a law badge pinned to my undershirt. And when he figgered I was suspectin' him of bein' in cahoots with Hank Traverse he was guessin' right. Because Hank's covered his tracks and throwed the rustlin' blame on Wingy Carr.

"Back yonder on the San Saba," Nevada continued, "I was leary of Wingy. That's why I didn't want you to go up the trail, Bowie. I knowed your daddy had bin murdered and his BB cattle stolen. And that's why I figgered that he had Blackie Traverse and one of his Arrow tough hands planted at your place. And the way he sent us back acrost the San Saba that day to fetch them horses looked suspicious. But he tells me he knowed you had a way of crossin' the San Saba that was safe, and he done what he did to rile me.

"Then, back at Seymour, when Muddy and them three other rustlers come into the saloon, Wingy played his string out. And I knowed he'd told me the truth when he said that he was takin' an Arrow trail herd north and no man was cuttin' his herd. That he'd take them cattle up the trail if he had to lay over at Doan's Crossin' six months to kill off every rustler in No Man's Land on both sides of the Red.

"When I handed that jackknife to Eli I knowed that Hank had given it to Muddy to give to Eli as a sign he'd be meetin' the trail herd somewhere north of the Red River. I watched Eli's eyes when he took the jackknife, and I read 'em like a schoolboy reads his lesson.

"Wingy Carr and his tough crew ain't rustlers, and they're gittin' their chance tonight to prove it. There's still a chance that Wingy has me fooled. And if he's foolin' us, your life and mine ain't worth two-bits. If he throws in with Hank Traverse's rustlers at Menard they'll kill me and you and they'll take this trail herd over if they have to kill every man sent here by Bat Masterson and Joe McCoy.

"Well, yonder rides Wingy and his tough cowhands, headed fer Menard. Tell the little lady good-by and overtake us, Bowie." Nevada reined his horse and rode on at a lope.

"Looks like you've got a trail herd on your hands, Kit," said Bowie awkwardly. "So long."

"It would help some," the girl told him, "if you kissed me, wouldn't it?"

It was a clumsy sort of a kiss as they leaned from their saddles. Then Bowie rode off to catch up with Wingy Carr and Nevada and the tough cowhands Wingy had hired to take his cattle up the trail. A trail herd branded with the road iron he called Arrow Pointed North.

Twenty saddled horses or more stood at the long hitch racks along the dusty street of the cow town of Menard, Texas. It was too dark to read the brands on the horses, but there was a big blue roan gelding that had been Ben Burdett's top horse, and it had Hank Traverse's saddle cinched to its back. Bowie recognized the horse and saddle, and the mute story it told steadied his nerves and he knew that he would kill Hank Traverse on sight as he would kill a rattlesnake.

They swung from their saddles, and Wingy Carr was a few steps in the lead as they strode through the swinging half doors of the saloon.

Hank Traverse stood at the bar with Eli and Lute. He was almost seven feet tall, long-boned, lean-jawed, with gray whiskers and eyes as green as

bottle glass. He and his sons and his rustler outfit had not expected Wingy to carry the fight to Menard and they were drinking and killing time until after midnight, when they planned to stampede the Arrow cattle, run off the remuda, and kill every Arrow man they sighted.

Hank Traverse whirled, his hands dropping to the two six-shooters he carried in holsters tied low on his lean thighs.

But he was a fraction of a second too slow. Wingy Carr had moved with the speed of a cougar leaping. His hook flashed like a streak of steel light. It sank to its wooden, steel-ringed butt in Hank Traverse's right shoulder and the old he-wolf of the Traverse tribe was yanked off balance.

Eli and Lute jerked their six-shooters, shooting as their gun barrels cleared the leather holsters. A lead slug tore through Bowie's shoulder just as he fired at Eli. Then Nevada was in front of him, and the little cowpuncher's gun was spitting flame as rapidly as he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger. And before Bowie's left hand could pick up the gun that had dropped to the floor when Eli's bullet smashed his gun arm, Nevada's gun had downed both the Traverse brothers.

Bowie straightened up with his six-shooter in his left hand. He and Nevada and Sandy and Chick were back to back, fighting the Traverse gun-toters. The place was thick with powder smoke, and the roar of guns was deafening.

Bowie saw Wingy and Hank Traverse fighting hand to hand. Hank Traverse had a hunting knife in his hand, and Wingy's hook was ripping and slashing. His wolfish grin showed through a smear of blood.

It was every man for himself and the Arrow men were outnumbered two to one. But their guns were spitting fire, and their aim was deadly.

Lute Traverse was wounded, but he was a long way from being dead. He was on his feet again and crouched low against the bar, trying to get near enough to Wingy to shoot him in the back.

Bowie saw him and yelled at the top of his voice. Nevada made a grab at Bowie with his left hand, but Bowie tore free and charged Lute. He landed on Lute's shoulders as Lute swung his gun to club Wingy Carr across the back of the head. Bowie and Lute went down in a threshing, fighting tangle. They rolled over and over on the floor, clubbing at each other's heads with their empty guns.

Bowie's right arm was broken at the shoulder and dangling uselessly. He was no match for Lute, whose only wound was a bullet hole through one thigh. Lute's gun smashed across Bowie's face, momentarily blinding him, and then it was like a part of some horrible nightmare. Lute, his ugly face snarling, raised the gun again to smash Bowie's brains out. The gun came down at him and Bowie jerked his head sideways. The gun barrel grazed his head and nearly tore his ear off. Bowie's one good arm was pinned down, and Lute was sobbing and cursing, crazy with a killer's white-hot hatred. Bowie saw Lute's gun swing upward for another blow, and he tried to move his head, but it seemed as paralyzed as if it were made of wood. He saw death coming and he was powerless to dodge it.

Then the grimace on Lute's face was wiped off. Lute's lower jaw dropped open and his tongue slid out and his eyes widened. The upraised hand with the blood-spattered six-shooter dropped limply, and Lute rolled sideways off Bowie, who saw Nevada with a smoking gun in his hand. Then Wingy's hook sank into Lute's back between the shoulders and flung Lute's limp body into the air.

The fight was over and the saloon was a bloody shambles. Wingy and Nevada pulled Bowie to his feet and propped him against the bar. Bowie looked down and saw Hank Traverse lying sprawled on his back on the floor, his giant frame ripped and torn. And on either side of his body lay his two dead sons.

Wingy had a dozen knife rips in his tough hide, but if they bothered him he didn't show it. He vaulted the bar like a cat leaping and yanked the saloon man, who lay flat behind his bar, to his feet. His hook dripped blood as he hung it in the saloon man's shirt collar and kicked him in the seat of the pants.

"Whiskey for the Arrow Pointed North!" he cried. "Whiskey for my fightin' men!"

Wingy grabbed bottles from the back bar and shoved one at Bowie and another at Nevada and grabbed one himself, sinking the cork through the neck of the bottle with his steel hook.

Then he vaulted to the top of the bar, and his voice sounded above the groans and cussing of the wounded.

"Oh, she came from County Kerry
On her way to Londonderry.
She was goin' there to marry
So she wouldn't have to work.
Oh, she jumped upon the table
Just to show that she was able.
She was Jerry McGilligan's daughter from old Cork!"

Wingy did a nimble jig, leaped down to the floor, and his backward kick tore the metal badge from Nevada's shirt bosom and sent it spinning in the air.

Two of the Arrow cowpunchers, Herb and Buck, had been killed. None of the others had escaped being hit somewhere by the flying hail of lead. But they had killed the three Traverses and five of the rustlers, and the wounded members of Hank Traverse's rustlers were only too willing to throw away their guns.

Wingy Carr sent the saloon man after a doctor, and when the medico got there, Wingy told him to work on Bowie first.

The doctor bandaged and splinted Bowie's broken shoulder and fastened it in a sling. Then he sewed Bowie's ear together and fastened a tight bandage around his head. And all the while Wingy Carr kept shoving the neck of a whiskey bottle between Bowie's teeth and telling him to swallow hard.

"Now fork your horse and ride back to camp," he said when the medico was finished. "Nevada and me is goin' to paint this cow town of Menard so red it'll look like the Fourth of July. And you better take along this bottle and nibble on 'er. If I know the daughter of Colonel Sam Dawson like I figger I do, it's goin' to be your one last chance to howl. She used to ride mighty close herd on the colonel's jug and make him say he liked crick water. Now rattle your hocks, you young warthawg, and tell them fellers they got a herd to hold, and they better not spill so much as one longhorned steer or lose any horses. And we'll git to camp fer breakfast. Here's this tin badge. Pin 'er on. Nevada won't need it tonight because it wouldn't look proper fer a damn policeman to git drunk with the toughest son of a snake that ever took a trail herd north."

Wingy raised his bottle in his right hand and leaped to the top of the bar. His steel hook waved and he made his toast.

"To the Arrow Pointed North! Drink her down!"

Bowie mounted his horse and headed for camp at a long lope. He threw away the bottle of whiskey Wingy Carr had given him. He had drunk more tonight than he'd ever drunk in all his life. His shoulder throbbed with dull pain, but he hardly felt it. He was riding under stars and a Texas moon. Riding to meet a girl whose hair was the color of old gold and whose violet-gray eyes were steady and brave.

Because they were young and love had come swiftly and as easily as if God had meant it that way and planned it from the beginning of their lives, Bowie and Kit had already begun the making of their lifetime plans. They had talked of a ranch in Montana, where there were snow-capped mountains and the smell of pines. A valley where Kit had been once with her father and where, she had told Bowie, she remembered how the wild roses smelled in June and the berries grew thick on green bushes and the grass touched your stirrups as you rode across the long coulees. They would trail their horses north and locate there in that green valley and stock it with a little bunch of cattle. Build a log cabin with a big stone fireplace, where they would sit of a long winter's evening and see dreams form in the flickering firelight. They would ride together across the rolling Montana prairie and in the evening the meadow larks would sing to them as they rode homeward.

That was to be the end of their long trail north. And the past would dim into fading memories. So had they planned it in that brief time they had talked as they rode their first night guard together on the Texas prairie along the Red River. And those dreams were to come true. Because Wingy Carr and Nevada were already planning to work this strip of country clean of Bench T and BB cattle that had been ranging north of the Red River and half of those cattle and half of the Bench T cattle in the trail herd were to be shipped and the money given to Bowie. Wingy Carr and Nevada were to take the proceeds of the rest of the cattle, and Wingy's tough hands were to get a big bonus for their fighting loyalty.

Bowie and Kit were both range orphans. Texans, bearing the names of fathers who had ridden the last long trail across the Big Divide, and each of them named for a man who had blazed pioneer trails. Kit Carson—Colonel Jim Bowie. Born in the shadow of the old Alamo, where those fighting Texans had died for the Lone Star State. Riding up the trail north to the new range in Montana. Pointing the trail herd of longhorn steers that wore Wingy Carr's road brand. The Arrow Pointed North!

THE END.

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PAYOFF AT

By Luke Short

I.

It was on the night of the day the decent folks in Waterman County lost the election that old Murdo Sayles saw this man. Murdo cast his vote and left Cobalt, the county seat, at noon, gloomily certain that law and order didn't have a chance. A high and inaccessible mountain country means hide-outs, hide-outs mean riffraff, riffraff means graft money and graft money means crooked lawmen. It was all that simple to old Murdo. Only he was inclined to carry his reasoning one point further. Crooked lawmen meant the end of his Happy Day Mine.

Murdo bucked a growing blizzard during the last hours of daylight, and even the tall timber of the slope didn't afford much protection. When he pulled into the clearing where the mine shacks were, he circled them to the corral and barn beyond.

After putting up his horse and forking down hay for him, he stepped out into a dusk made gray by the snow.

And then he saw this man. He was sitting motionlessly on a sleek, long-legged pony, a tall dim figure in the saddle.

Murdo put his hand on the gun under his mackinaw and walked slowly toward the figure, which did not move.

"You gonna fight or ain't you?" Murdo growled, certain that this man was the first of many unpleasant visitors to come.

"Fight what?" a low voice asked.

"Me. Else what do you want up here?"

There was a moment's silence. "Ever get rolled out of your blankets by a grizzly?" the man asked.

"What if I didn't?" Murdo asked shortly.

"I did, this mornin'. Up on the Rain Peaks. I'm cut up a little and hungry."

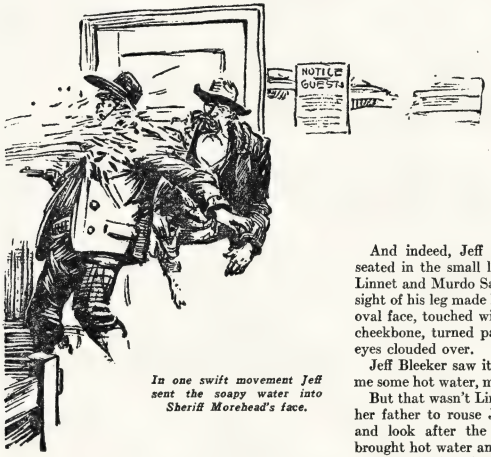
Murdo walked closer to regard his visitor. "You're a liar on two counts," he observed gravely. "Grizzlies has been holed up for a month. And the devil hisself couldn't get over the Rain Peaks this time of year."

The man pulled his horse around. "Thanks," he said dryly. "If I can ever do you a bad turn, let me know."

"Wait!" Murdo called. The man stopped and Murdo went even closer this time. He could see

RAIN PEAK

Young Jeff Bleeker was ready to fight for the law in Cobalt and when there was no law, or next to none, he battled hard to make it



In one swift movement Jeff sent the soapy water into Sheriff Morehead's face.

now that the man's left arm was in a sling made out of flour sacking. He could even hear the rider's teeth chattering in that slow, cold snow.

Immediately Murdo felt ashamed of himself. "Light," he invited abruptly. "I thought you was someone else. You're welcome to shelter and food."

The man's face broke into a smile that Murdo didn't see. "Reckon I got to be helped out of the saddle," he said.

Murdo lifted him down. It was obvious now that the man was hurt, for his Levis were torn and stiff with frozen blood. In sudden panic Murdo bawled, "Linnet girl! Linnet!"

Then he turned to the rider and said gruffly, "Why didn't you say so sooner? You set there talkin' like you was figurin' on borrowin' a match."

He guided the stranger across the snow toward the door, and now he saw that the man was young, somewhere close to six feet tall, and apparently hurt badly.

Halfway to the shack the door opened and a girl holding a lamp stepped through the doorway. She had a shawl around her shoulders and when she saw her father and this stranger her mouth opened a little in surprise.

"Get some hot water ready!" Murdo ordered. "This man's hurt!"

And indeed, Jeff Bleeker was. When he was seated in the small living room of Murdo's shack, Linnet and Murdo Sayles took a look at him. The sight of his leg made Linnet a little sick. Her small oval face, touched with healthy color on each high cheekbone, turned pale at the sight, and her blue eyes clouded over.

Jeff Bleeker saw it and he said, "You just bring me some hot water, miss. I'll make out by myself."

But that wasn't Linnet Sayles' way. She ordered her father to rouse Joe and a couple of the boys and look after the stranger's horse. Then she brought hot water and set to work.

Bleeker's right leg had been clawed, but luckily the sweep of the grizzly's paw had been down the curve of the muscle. To stop the bleeding, he had poured flour over the wound and let it cake, so that it was sterile enough.

His tanned narrow face turned a little green while Linnet was washing the wound, but once it was done he grinned. And when she rebandaged his left arm, which showed five deep claw marks, he was almost smiling. His black hair was matted with the sweat that had poured from him during those long hours of pain in the saddle, but he had a clean, wholesome look despite the smeared blood on his beard-stubbled face.

Murdo Sayles helped his daughter as well as a clumsy man could. Short, burly, with a grizzled thatch of iron-gray hair, he was a man whose face was incised with the lines of trouble, and lately suspicion had mounted into his eyes to stay there. He knew this himself, and the knowledge prompted what he said after Linnet was finished.

"I'm a mighty sorry man for what I said out there."

"That's all right," Bleeker replied. "My story did sound funny."

"You really did come over the Rain Peaks?"

Jeff nodded.

"Why?"

"Ignorance, I reckon."

"And what was a grizzly doin' out in this weather?"

Jeff shrugged. "I've heard of men that's seen 'em in winter, but I never believed it up till now. Anyway, this one went through my grub and then come over to me. I woke up with somethin' cold and wet sniffin' my face. The first move I made for my gun, he was on me. He didn't get rough, just curious, I reckon. But it was enough to make it sort of hard for me."

Murdo nodded and Linnet came into the room with a tray of food which she placed across the arms of Jeff's chair. He ate ravenously, and they left him there while they retired to the tiny kitchen to eat their own supper.

Murdo, now that his conscience was no longer troubled, settled down into his usual gloom, and Linnet asked him about the election. They talked idly all through the meal, and the words came distinctly through the kitchen door to Jeff Bleeker.

"This is the end," Murdo said finally. "At six this mornin' every saloon was boomin'. Every hard case in the country was in town, had been all night long. When it come time to vote, they done so with a gun. If an election judge wanted to live, he just didn't challenge any votes. They was mostly voted by ten, and I'd say that roughly the votin' was six to one against us."

"Then Tim Morehead is sheriff?"

"Yeah. And will be for the next six terms."

"What do you aim to do, dad?"

"Sell out," Murdo said bitterly. "It's either that or get robbed blind."

"But who could you sell to?"

"Murray Lowden," Murdo answered slowly. "At least I'll have the satisfaction of knowin' it's goin' to a decent man. I don't know how he does it, but he's got them hard cases to let him alone."

"Murray's a fighter."

"Aye." He looked up fondly at Linnet. "There's no chance it'll stay in the family at the same time, is there, girl?"

Linnet flushed. "I . . . I don't know, dad. I think so, maybe. I like Murray awfully well."

Murdo grunted. "So do I. Still, the Happy Day is no reason why you should marry him if he don't suit you."

"But—I think he does, dad."

Linnet suddenly remembered the stranger, and she went over to the kitchen door to see if he had overheard. But Bleeker's head was bent over his tray, and he appeared to be sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Linnet took his tray and got a blanket and threw it over him. The room was warm, heat from the open fireplace before which his chair was drawn making it almost uncomfortably hot. She looked at his relaxed face a moment, then went back to the kitchen.

Murdo smoked in silence. Linnet knew how this turn of events hurt him. With a blind faith, he believed in the future of the Happy Day. Refusing all help, all financing, he had developed it himself, raising it from a one-man diggings to a fifteen-man mine. A stamp mill had been his latest innovation, and every cent that they made from the Happy Day went into new equipment and new inventions. It was low-grade ore, but there was a lot of it, and it was getting richer as they worked. Some day, Murdo Sayles was certain, he would have a real proposition. And now, just when the future looked bright, a set of crooked county officers had upset everything.

Waterman County was some four hundred miles from the capital, a forgotten corner of the Territory on the long and rugged slope of the Rain Peaks. Too barren for widespread ranching, it was poor country, spare in worth-while population, but dense with the impermanent sort, the kind that made the town of Cobalt intolerable for decent folk.

And now that this lawless element had triumphed at the polls, nothing was safe. If a man had a mine, he had to ship gold. And Murdo saw the handwriting on the wall. With the hills filled with outlaws, a man couldn't ship a single bar of bullion. And once that word got out, it wouldn't be long before riders raided the mine itself.

A knock on the door roused Murdo and he went to open it. His face lighted with pleasure at the sight of his visitor.

"Murray! Come in, son."

Murray Lowden came in, stamping the snow from his boots. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, with a full aggressive face. He gave the impression of power—an attribute that somehow seemed at odds with his apparent modesty.

"I came up to mourn with you," he said with a slow grin for Linnet. "The news is all bad."

"Morehead is in?" Linnet asked.

"Seven to one," Murray stated. Murdo helped him off with his coat, as he continued: "I reckon it's a lot like a wake, Murdo, comin' up here to ask you about your mine at this time. Still, I want it. Business is business for you, just like it is for me." He looked at Murdo from black, flashing eyes. "You still want to sell?"

"What else can I do?"

"That's up to you," Murray said gravely. "Personally, in your place, I wouldn't consider it. It's too good a proposition."

"I'm too old to scrap around with hard cases."

Murray smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Well, I'm not. I'll think I'm a lucky man if I get a chance to fight to keep this mine. If you want to sell, Murdo, name your own figure."

Linnet said, "Let's go in by the fire."

They went into the living room and the first thing Murray saw was Jeff Bleeker. He paused and said softly, "Who's this?"

Jeff roused at the sound of his voice, and Murdo explained what had happened, introducing Jeff.

When he was finished Jeff said, "I'll just step out, if you'll excuse me."

"You'll stay right there," Linnet said firmly. "Dad's going to talk over business with Murray, and there's no reason why you shouldn't stay where you are."

Jeff subsided under her orders and the talk soon switched to the mine. Bleeker sat there and listened, saying nothing, smoking his pipe. Linnet sat off in a corner and listened, too. Murray Lowden made his proposition, which was a complicated one having to do with the payments for machinery, the size of the down payment, and other details. Murdo Sayles expressed satisfaction with the offer and Murray then drew a prepared agreement from his pocket and they signed it. Linnet was the first witness, Jeff Bleeker the second.

When he came to witness it, Jeff said, "Mind if I read it over?"

"Never sign anything you don't read," Murray Lowden said with a grin. "Go ahead."

The talk turned to the election again and Jeff read the agreement. Finished, he laid it on his lap and packed his pipe again, watching these three carefully. He struck a match and raised it to his pipe, and then something they were saying attracted his attention. He didn't seem to notice that his match had fallen on the deed and had set it afire.

Linnet was the first to see it. She gave a little cry that startled Jeff Bleeker, then jumped to her feet and rushed toward him. He looked surprised, and then, apparently for the first time, the tiny flame in his lap attracted his attention. He slapped at the fire, half rising in his seat as a shower of sparks fell to the floor. When it was finally extinguished, Linnet took the paper from him and held it up. A little less than a third of it remained.

Bleeker's face reflected misery and embarrassment as he looked at Murray Lowden.

"I'm certainly sorry, mister. I shouldn't 've tried to light that match. I reckon my hand was so shaky the match slipped out."

Murray looked at him with murderous eyes. "I'm sorry too," he said curtly. "Now I'll have to make another trip up here from town."

"I oughta be kicked," Jeff said morosely, adding, "Can't you remember what it was and write it out?"

Murray said, "Stranger, I let a lawyer do my legal work. I'll have to get him to make another."

Jeff hung his head, ashamed.

Murray Lowden's visit was spoiled. He settled into a half-surly silence that made old Murdo uneasy and brought a worried frown to Linnet's face. But it was soon over, for Lowden rose and said he would have to be getting back to Cobalt if he didn't want to be snowed in.

He didn't offer to shake hands with Jeff as he went, and Linnet, almost relieved that he was going, said good-by to him at the kitchen door while Murdo went out with him to the stable.

Linnet came into the room after he was gone and went directly to Bleeker.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" she asked angrily.

"What?"

"Set fire to that deed."

Bleeker's grin was slow, friendly. "Yes, ma'am," he said, surprisingly.

Linnet's eyes opened wider. "Why?"

"Somethin' about it smells."

"You mean Murray Lowden is crooked? He's not! You don't even know him! How do you dare say such a thing about my friend?"

Jeff held up a hand. "Easy, Miss Sayles. When I was eatin' supper in here, I couldn't help but hear your dad. Didn't he say that Murray Lowden wasn't havin' any trouble with these Waterman County hard cases?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Don't that look sort of queer?"

"Why should it?"

"What does Lowden do?"

"He's a cattle buyer."

"The very man that would suffer most from a bunch of outlaw riders."

Linnet frowned thoughtfully, but Jeff wasn't going to give her a chance to protest. "Another thing, miss. This is none of my business, but I overheard it and I want to say it. Murray Lowden wants to marry you?"

Linnet flushed, but nodded her head.

"I've had girls," Jeff said slowly. "I never wanted to marry 'em, but I liked 'em. And when I called on 'em, I didn't talk business to their fathers. If I want to talk business, I'd save that till later, after I'd really said hello to my girl. Lowden just nods to you and starts in talking about buyin' the mine."

"He . . . he was excited," Linnet protested.

"Yeah. He'd rather have the mine than a wife."

Linnet said angrily, "That's not so!"

"Another thing," Jeff went on implacably. "Why didn't he draw up a new deed? You got pen and paper. But no, he wants to go to a lawyer and make it air-tight." He leaned forward. "For instance, miss. That clause about payin' so much

per month providin' the mine pays out so much per month. If the mine don't make the quota, he don't pay."

"But it does make the quota!"

"Under you, yes. Under him, I bet it wouldn't. Is your dad goin' to keep a bookkeeper watchin' him?"

Linnet said nothing, watching Bleeker's dark face. Jeff leaned back in his chair. "No, ma'am. Your dad's walkin' right into a trap. He's suspicious, but he's likely suspicious of the wrong people. If you let him sign that deed he's never goin' to get paid for that mine."

Linnet's eyes were really angry now. "But he will sign! What do you know about it?"

"Enough that if you give me time, I can prove this Murray Lowden is crooked. Will you keep him from signin' until I can prove it?"

"Certainly not!" Linnet said angrily. "And I think you're a conceited, skeptical saddle bum! Good night!"

She went into her room. Sayles came in later and offered his room to Jeff, but Jeff told him he'd rather sleep in the chair. They said good night.

Next morning Jeff Bleeker was gone.

II.

Cobalt was getting the tail end of the blizzard, but here it was nothing compared with the storm in the mountains. If Jeff had waited an hour longer he would have been snowed in at the Happy Day. As it was, he was out and Murdo Sayles and his daughter were walled away from Murray Lowden, who was certain to return as soon as he could with a new deed. Whatever was done would have to be done before a trail could be broken to the Happy Day.

Cobalt's streets were a mire of slushy mud, and a thick snow drifted down to dissolve in it and make it even soupier. The false-front stores that flanked the wide single street had wooden awnings the tops of which were frosted with the new snow. Store lamps burned at midday against the gloom of the storm, and Jeff had to watch carefully to avoid riding past the hotel, which was wedged in between the sheriff's office and the Cobalt Emporium.

He left his horse at the feed stable nearby and made his way back to the hotel, limping painfully. His leg still hurt, and wisdom told him to rest up. But the image of Linnet Sayles and her father about to be done out of the Happy Day would give him no rest. All the way down from the Happy Day he had been turning this over in his mind. He was strangely convinced that Murray Lowden was crooked—but how could he convince the girl and her father? Last night's appeal to the girl had been useless. She didn't love Murray Lowden, and it was only the old man's blind conviction that Lowden was one real man among a hundred crooks that influenced her. And if he was to prove Lowden a crook, it must be before that handsome, oily-tongued hombre had a chance to get back to the Happy Day with a new deed. Turning into the hotel lobby, he thought he had the plan.

Three men were sitting in the lobby, and at his entrance one of them drifted out to the street. The other two watched him. When he paid his dollar and a half and went up to his room, he paused at the head of the stairs long enough to hear the two men walk over to the register.

"Jeff Bleeker," he heard one of them murmur. "Ain't he the one?"

"Sure. Couldn't have left more'n a few hours after Murray."

"Better go catch Ed and tell him this gent's name."

Jeff went to his room, smiling a little. Unless he missed his guess, something was going to happen and it was going to happen shortly.

He was shaving in front of the mirror when the knock came on his door.

"Come in," he called, without turning around.

The first man in held a gun and wore a star that showed when his sheepskin coat parted. He was a heavy man, with a drink-flushed face that sagged at the corners of his loose mouth. He looked around the room suspiciously, then stepped aside to let in another man, one of the lobby sitters.

"Mornin', gentlemen," Jeff said mildly. He went right on shaving.

The sheriff cuffed a greasy Stetson back on his head and said, "Well, well, if this ain't luck."

"Why? Ain't you ever seen a man shave before?" Jeff said in mock surprise.

"Don't be funny," the sheriff said. "I'm talkin' about my luck and your hard luck. It ain't often that a sheriff has a chance for an arrest like this the day after he's elected."

"Especially when he's been so drunk durin' the night that his eyes are still a little off center," Jeff retorted calmly.

"Not so off center they can't read reward posters," the sheriff growled.

Jeff turned and said slowly, "Meanin' me?"

"Meanin' you."

Sheriff Tim Morehead came over and slipped Jeff's gun from its holster.

Jeff said, "I always figured I was due to be famous. But I can't remember ever bein' asked for

my name to have it circulated in every tank town sheriff's office."

"You got a poor memory. Ever hear of a murder of a United States marshal in Miles City by the name of Courtney?"

"Never did."

"Then your memory is poorer than I reckoned, Ed Sholto."

Jeff had his face turned to the mirror again, and he grinned. He was familiar with this bluff. When a crooked lawman wanted another man out of the county, all he had to do was dig up a reward dodger with a description roughly corresponding to that of the innocent man. Then all that remained was to arrest the innocent party, ship him out of the county—or shoot him, pleading that he tried to escape.

"My, my," Jeff drawled. "How a man's past catches up with him. Or some other man's past, should I say?"

"You're comin' along with me, Sholto, whatever you say," Morehead growled.

"Can I finish shavin'?"

"No!"

Jeff's eyes narrowed. "Sheriff, you're goin' to regret that."

"Wash your face and come along," Morehead sneered. "And be quick about it."

He stepped forward and rammed his gun in Jeff's back. Jeff shrugged and laid down his razor, then leaned over the basin, dousing his face. He looked under his arm and saw that the sheriff's gun had moved off center and that he was holding it a little toward the left.

Jeff picked up the basin, the movement hidden by his body, and moved imperceptibly to the right. Then, in one swift movement, he sent the basin of soapy water over his left shoulder into Sheriff Morehead's face.

The gun went off just as Jeff wheeled out of the way. He whirled, threw his arms about the sheriff's fat body, and reached down for his gun, which the sheriff had rammed in his belt.

The movement was so quick that by the time the deputy had his gun out, Sheriff Morehead's broad back hid Jeff completely. Once he had his gun, Jeff rammed it in the sheriff's side.

"Drop your gun," Jeff said quietly, and stepped on the lawman's toe to emphasize his point. The gun clattered to the floor and then Jeff whirled the sheriff around and, still protected by his body, drawled, "Tell that stuffed shirt to put in his chips or get out of the pot. Whatever he does, he better do it quick, too."

"Put it down, Ed," Morehead ordered weakly. The deputy hesitated, then complied, and Jeff shoved the sheriff away from him. Now that immediate danger was past the lawman started to swear, and stooped down to rub the toe of his boot.

"I reckoned you might like that," Jeff drawled, grinning. "You've had your foot on a bar rail so long you got oversize arches, sheriff." He paused, regarding the two of them. "A couple of jokers, if I ever saw any. Now what's the gag, sheriff?"

"What gag?"

"What am I bein' run out of town for?"

"I told you," Sheriff Morehead answered sullenly. He added, "You ain't got a chance, mister. Better turn over that gun and we'll forget you tried to escape."

"Answer my question," Jeff said stubbornly. "What have you got against me? I've only been in town an hour."

"I set a man in the lobby a-purpose for this," Morehead growled, "a man with a memory for faces and descriptions. You're Ed Sholto. What you tryin' to dodge it for?"

Jeff's grin was slow, amused. "So Murray Lowden don't like me, huh?"

The expression on Sheriff Morehead's face was transparent. He even knew it was and grinned weakly.

"That's it," Jeff went on. "Thought you'd accommodate a friend."

"Listen," Morehead said earnestly. "Take a tip, mister. I never saw you before. But Waterman County is for Waterman County folks. You stuck your face in somethin' last night that wasn't none of your business. I just aimed to ease you out of the county."

"At Lowden's orders?"

"Call it that if you want."

Jeff said, "Where'll I find Lowden?"

But Sheriff Morehead wasn't a fool. Here was a man with a gun and a grudge, but without knowledge as to the whereabouts of his man. He smiled more confidently now and said, "Suppose you find out."

Jeff's eyes narrowed. He walked over to his sheepskin coat and put it on. Then he picked up the two guns from the floor, threw them out the window, and put on his Stetson.

"I asked you a question," he said softly. "Do I I have to kill one of you to get the other one to talk?"

"I reckon you do," Sheriff Morehead said. As that last word was spoken, Jeff let the hammer slip. There was a roar that was deafening, and the sheriff's hat vanished behind him.

"Next time I'll come closer," Jeff murmured. "When I ask a question, I aim to get an answer. Where's Lowden's office?"

Sheriff Morehead was a stubborn man, but not suicidally stubborn, and the expression on Jeff Bleeker's face was not pleasant.

"On the corner above the saddle shop," he growled. "If you go there, I'll cut you to doll rags before you get down his stairs."

Jeff said, "You come over and I'll cut Lowden to doll rags before you get up 'em. Just remember that."

He put his hand on the window sill and glanced below him. There was a ten-foot drop to the sloping roof of the next building—a risky fall for a man with a bum leg.

Already, Jeff could hear footsteps pounding down the hall. He went over to the door and locked it, tossing the key out the window. Then saluted the sheriff and deputy and climbed out on the sill.

"See you again," he said and jumped. He landed on the snowy roof and immediately lost his footing and began to slide toward the eave. Sheriff Morehead appeared at the window, cursing, and threw the wash bowl at him just as he slipped over the trough of the eave and dropped to the ground. His leg pained, but not badly.

He made his way to the street, cut across it for the saddle shop, and mounted the stairs that were built against the side of the building. There was only one door at the top of the stairs and he didn't bother to knock. Already, he could hear the shouting in the street.

Murray Lowden was seated in a swivel chair at an untidy roll-top desk. A barrel stove in the corner made the room uncomfortably hot. The office was furnished with several old calendars, a huge double pile of Stockmen's Gazettes, two rickety chairs and a small square safe. Jeff glanced around him, then closed the door and slipped the bolt home.

When he turned, he was looking into Murray Lowden's gun.

"Put that away," Jeff drawled. "I've got that jugheaded sheriff on my tail now. He's dumb enough, but I didn't think you were."

Without paying any attention to the gun, he crossed over to a chair and sat down.

"What do you want?" Lowden asked in a cold voice.

"Send that sheriff away when he stumbles up here. After that, we'll talk business."

"What kind of business?"

"Gold," Jeff said.

Lowden narrowed his eyes at the word, but his attention was shortly taken up by a hammering on the door. He rose, undecided, then went over to the door and said, "Hang around downstairs, Tim. I'm talkin'."

"You all right?" came Morehead's voice.

"You fool, of course I am!" Lowden said snappishly. He returned to his chair and Jeff could see that his eyes were red from a night without sleep.

"Now talk," he commanded, the gun still on his lap.

"It's about this Happy Day Mine," Jeff began.

"Of course it is! What else could we talk about?"

"You want it?"

"You heard me offer to buy it. You saw me buy it, in fact, before you burned up that deed." His eyes narrowed. "What's the play, cowboy? You can't get away with that kind of stuff forever. Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am," Jeff drawled. "Just a saddle bum that got took in and fed. I was there only an hour before you came. But I reckon I know more about that Happy Day business than you do."

"For instance?" Lowden sneered.

"For instance, when did old man Sayles ship bullion last?"

"How should I know?" Lowden said cautiously.

"I think you do know if you'll try real hard to remember," Jeff said.

Lowden stared at him a long moment. "About a month and a half ago," he said.

"Correct. There's about a month and a half's gold output up there now. You reckon they aimed to give it over to you when you bought 'em out?"

"No."

"All right. They're goin' to ship it, then."

"What of it?"

"What of it!" Jeff echoed, his face expressing surprise. "Why, you ain't got good sense, Lowden. Why buy the mine right away? Dicker around a week until this snow melts down. By that time, they won't be sure you're goin' to buy and they'll have to get that bullion shipment on a train."

"What does that mean?" Lowden asked sharply.

"It means you'll get a lot of the Happy Day gold before you buy the mine. If you bought the mine, they'd weigh the gold and turn it over to you for market price. This way, when they're not certain you'll buy, they'll ship the gold, and you hold up the shipment."

"How do you know they'll ship?"

"I heard 'em say so."

Lowden leaned forward. "Just how did you happen to hear that?"

Jeff told him about being taken in and bandaged and fed. The conversation in the kitchen he told word for word, including mention of Linnet's affections for Lowden. The only untruth he told was about the gold shipment.

"That's why Murdo was so glad to see you," Jeff concluded. "That gold shipment has been worryin' him. He knows the longer he keeps it the less chance he has of gettin' to the railroad. He's even afraid of being raided there at the Happy Day."

Lowden settled back in his chair, his eyes speculative. "What did you come to me for?" he asked abruptly.

Jeff smiled faintly. "I've knocked around too long not to know a good thing when I see it, Lowden. You got a good thing here, and you're playin' it down to the last white chip. That's all right. But if I can show you how to get a few more chips out of it, I can make a little money."

"How much?"

"How many men you got workin' for you besides the sheriff and his gunnies?"

Lowden hesitated, then said, "Lots."

"How many?" Jeff insisted.

"What's that to you?" Lowden asked.

"Just this. If you name the number of men you'll send to hold up the bullion shipment, I'll know what kind of cut I'll get. I don't know the amount they're sendin', so that's the only way we can work it."

"I'll send ten men."

"And I'll take two shares."

Lowden thought a moment, then nodded. "That's all right, so far as it goes. But how will I know when the stuff is shipped?"

"I'll let you know."

"How could you?"

Jeff looked surprised. "Didn't I tell you?" he said blandly. "Murdo Sayles has given me a job at the Happy Day."

III.

Jeff stayed in town three days, and most of his time was spent at the Rain Peaks Saloon until word came down from the hills that the road to the Happy Day was passable. He left town with the certain knowledge that Murray Lowden was the man directly responsible for the lawlessness here. Before Morehead was elected sheriff he had been Lowden's contact man between the hill hide-outs and the Lowden headquarters.

Now that was no longer necessary. Lowden had daily conferences with Sheriff Morehead, and the hard cases didn't bother to keep to the hills any more. Cobalt was in all respects an outlaw town, although it didn't realize it, since Lowden decreed that a modicum of order should be kept.

The trail to the Happy Day was deep with snow, and Jeff's horse labored hard that day. But he labored no harder than Jeff's brain. For, any way Jeff looked at it, the possibility of his convincing Linnet Sayles and her father was remote. Jeff arrived at that conclusion at noon.

At four, he rode into the Happy Day camp. In daylight, it was a much larger place than he had imagined. Down the slope past the big bunkhouse the bulky shaft house of the Happy Day Mine rose among the trees. There was a sizable muck dump below the grade and mules were traveling constantly back and forth as they dumped full cars and hauled back empty ones into the shaft house.

Murdo Sayles was the first to see Jeff. He had returned to the house for a new lantern globe and was on his way back to the shaft house when Jeff emerged into the clearing.

He stood still until Jeff reached him. "You're back, huh?" he asked without much friendliness. "Sort of like to ride at nights, don't you?"

"I learned somethin' you might want to hear, down in Cobalt," Jeff said.

"If it's that Murray Lowden is crooked, I don't want to hear it," Murdo said bluntly. "That it?"

"I got proof, too," Jeff said, nodding.

"The devil you have! A man can prove anything he sets out to prove. That don't prove he's right, though. I'm busy." Without another word Murdo tramped off. Jeff watched him go, his anger stirred by the old man's stubbornness. Linnet had told him of their conversation, then, and it had only served to increase the old man's stubbornness.

He looked up, sighing—and saw Linnet Sayles in the door. She was wearing a blue dress with a full apron over it, and Jeff thought he had never seen a prettier girl.

"If you want to talk to me, you'll have to hurry," she said coldly. "I'm about to sweep out the men's bunkhouse."

Jeff dismounted and she stepped inside.

He looked at her and wondered how he was going to begin.

She began for him. "I heard what you said to dad. His sentiments are pretty close to mine."

"Even if I know that Murray Lowden is behind all the lawlessness in this county?" Jeff asked.

"That's a lie!"

"Is it? Listen." And he told her, fact for fact, word for word, of his coming to Cobalt, of his reception by the sheriff, of his talk with Murray, and of their plan to rob the fake bullion shipment. Linnet listened, and as he progressed with the story, he noticed her getting paler and paler. When he had finished, he asked quickly, "Anything wrong, miss?"

"Wrong!" Linnet cried. "Oh, you fool! You simple fool!"

Jeff winced.

"I never heard such vicious nonsense in my life!" Linnet blazed.

"You don't believe it?"

Linnet was speechless with anger. She ran out into the yard and called, "Dad! Dad!" Old Murdo was almost at the shaft house, but he turned at the sound of his daughter's voice.

"Come up here," she called, "and bring Doug with you!"

Murdo appeared in a moment with a young bareheaded giant of a man beside him. Linnet marched up to Jeff and said, "Now tell dad what you just told me."

Jeff did. He tried to make them understand, but while he talked he saw that granite stubbornness rise up and wall them away from him. His voice trailed off at the end. He almost believed himself that he had been dreaming all this, to look at them.

"So you've got proof that Murray Lowden is just a penny-ante crook?" Murdo sneered. "What would

you say if I told you that over a period of ten years he's loaned me forty thousand dollars at no interest? What would you say if I told you I thought so much of him my daughter is going to marry him?" His eyes narrowed. "What would you say if I told you to get the devil out of here? And now!"

"Why hasn't he been up here with a new deed then?" Jeff countered desperately.

"Because he gave his word!" Murdo roared. "He'll buy this place in his own good time—and in spite of you!"

There wasn't anything Jeff could do. It was like trying to push over a wall of stone with words.

"Mister," Murdo said finally, "get out of here!"

But Jeff Bleeker had a stubborn streak in him, too. "Hanged if I will!" he exploded. "You've got to listen to me!"

Murdo said, "You're a sick man. We took you in and nursed you. But if you don't get away from us, you'll be a danged sight sicker and you'll need three nurses where you needed one before."

Jeff's eyes smoldered with anger. "And who'll make me sick?"

"I warned you," Murdo said, his voice choked with anger.

"And I'm warnin' you."

Murdo turned to the tow-headed young man beside him. "Doug, throw him out of here. Knock him unconscious if you have to, but try not to hurt him any more than you can help."

Doug nodded and took a step toward Jeff. Jeff slugged out with his left, catching Doug on the side of the head and staggering him.

"Keep away from me, fella," Jeff said in a level, cold voice.

But Doug was a man bred among miners, and liked to fight for the pure joy of it. Strong, untaught, but stout-hearted, this was just another scrap to him. He sailed into Jeff, arms flailing, and Jeff straightened him out with an uppercut that snapped his head back, exposing his throat. A hook followed immediately into Doug's throat. It was a blow that hurt, a blow that would have taken the fight out of an ordinary man. But the youngster doggedly bore in, and Jeff had to give ground. He found that his stiff leg was hindering his movements. Once, when one of Doug's wild slugs landed on his shoulder, it almost paralyzed his arm.

They circled around in the wet snow, Jeff holding his opponent off with long looping blows. But the man seemed unconquerable and Jeff knew that if he was to end this, he would have to end it soon.

He planted himself, dodged two wild swings, then dug in with his feet and started boring in.

Suddenly, his foot hit a strip of ice and he stumbled to one knee. Like a cat, Doug was on him. A savage right to Jeff's head sprawled him his length in the snow. He tried to gather his knees to his chest to protect himself from Doug's certain leap, but the bandage on his right leg held it rigid.

And then Doug landed on him with a drive that knocked all the breath from him. He tried to cover his face, and felt his guard beaten down. Then he tried to wrestle the bigger man off, but it was useless. Savage, slogging blows, timed like the ticks of a clock, rained on his face. And slowly, slowly, a kind of paralysis seized his arms. It was put to an end finally by a crushing blow on his jaw that made huge spinning pin wheels of stars bright against the darkness engulfing him.

When he came to, he was lying against a tree far down the trail. Whoever had brought him there had been thoughtful enough to cover him with a blanket, build a fire and tie his horse to a nearby tree.

He sat up, gingerly rubbing his jaw, the memory of the fight returning. He smiled ruefully at the

thought of that strip of ice which had meant his downfall. Murdo Sayles had made his threat good—he had thrown him out. Still, there was no rancor in Jeff's heart against the old man, only a kind of stubborn pity. But how could you save people who wouldn't be saved? If they persisted in not believing anything bad about Murray Lowden, they were doomed.

He dragged himself to his feet and started back to town. As soon as he was clear of the tall timber, he started to examine the country. An hour later, he found what he wanted—a road that sloped off to the east toward the railroad. He settled down to straight riding, and by afternoon he had come to a way station on the railroad. A sun-blistered board on the side of the tiny shack announced that it was Pinon Wells.

He had everything he needed now, and he put his horse toward Cobalt, following the tracks.

Murray Lowden was in his office when Jeff came in.

"I thought you went to the Happy Day," Lowden said.

"I did. Can you shag ten of your men together tonight?"

Murray's eyes widened. "Is it tonight they're shipping?"

Jeff nodded. "I came down to get a buckboard for 'em. When you didn't come up today and Murdo saw that the road was passable, he got scared. They're shippin' tonight. He even made me go over the road to Pinon Wells to see that it was open."

"Will the train stop?"

"I gave the agent a gold eagle to flag it down." He smiled knowingly at Lowden. "Well, there's your chance, mister. Just like I said."

Murray smiled with satisfaction. "Who's takin' the stuff down?"

"I am. Doug is guardin'. Just the two of us."

Murray nodded and frowned thoughtfully. "Let's see. Don't that road angle sharp where it narrows to dive into Meeker Canyon?"

"I dunno what canyon it's called, but it sure narrows there in one place."

"That's the place we'll stick you up, then. That all right?"

"Yeah. But be sure those rannies of yours know it's me on the buckboard. I don't want any blind shootin'."

Murray Lowden's eyes veiled over with some inner amusement, but his face was impassive. "Of course. There'll be no shooting. Know how much will be in the shipment?"

"They didn't say," Jeff replied.

Afterward, he went downstairs and crossed over to the livery stable. The memory of Lowden's eyes when he promised there would be no shooting fed a slow anger in Jeff that was hard to control. Lowden's orders to his men would be to cut down on both Jeff and Doug, for in that way the two shares that were to go to Jeff would be saved. It was murder, but Lowden wouldn't stop at that. That was the law of the dark trails, dog eat dog. But as long as Lowden thought Jeff was simple enough to propose such a proposition, it suited Jeff.

He dickered for a buckboard with the hostler, and once that was settled, he bought two mules and rented an extra saddle horse. The saddle horse was tied to the endgate of the buckboard. Then, as soon as the mules were hitched up, Jeff began the trip back to the Happy Day.

If he could once prove to Linnet Sayles that Murray Lowden was the crook Jeff knew him for, then things would be easier. And tonight, hell or high water he was going to prove it.

He reached the Happy Day about ten o'clock and on foot. His team and saddle horse he had left down the road out of sight. A brief survey of the camp disclosed that the men were in bed, since there was no light in the bunkhouse. But there was a lamp lighted in Murdo's place, indicating that they were still up.

Jeff stood out there in the cold night and figured. If he broke in and tried to drag Linnet out at the point of a gun, Murdo would fight. The hullabaloo would attract the attention of the miners, and once they were aroused, their handling of him would be considerably less gentle than Doug's. No, that was out. There must be some other way.

And then he remembered that supper Linnet had given him. It was fried eggs he had eaten that night. Maybe those eggs came from town and maybe they didn't. He'd see. He made a slow circle toward the barns and there, just on the other side of the woodshed, he found the chicken coop. That would serve his purpose.

He found a stick, unlatched the door and threw the stick inside. Immediately there arose a startled squawking. Jeff looked over at the shack window and saw Linnet's head framed in it. He opened the chicken house door again and threw another stick. Linnet's head disappeared at the sound of the renewed squawking and presently the door to the shack opened and she came out with a lantern, a sheepskin coat thrown over her shoulders.

Jeff ducked behind the chicken house and heard her approach and open the door. Softly, then, he tiptoed around the corner. She was standing there in the doorway, scolding the chickens.

When Jeff was almost to her, he stepped on a fragment of ice and it crunched loudly under his foot. Linnet wheeled, and Jeff leaped toward her. One mittened hand circled her waist, while his other clapped over her mouth. There was a fierce struggle for a moment, then Jeff said swiftly, "You're all right! It's me, Jeff! Only don't make a sound!"

She stopped struggling at that. His hand still over her mouth, Jeff picked her up and carried her around the barns and down the road.

When they reached the buckboard, he set her down in the snow. For a moment, all she could do was gasp.

"Is this a kidnaping?" she asked angrily, at last.

"Sort of." Jeff grinned. "You and your dad are so stubborn I reckon I had to do it."

"Dad will kill you for this!"

"I reckon he would if he caught me. But he won't. That's why you better climb in."

"I'll yell!"

"Go ahead. We're too far away to be heard, anyway."

Linnet subsided at that. She was a small erect figure in the dark, and so lonely-looking that it almost made Jeff sorry he had done this.

"Where are we going?" she asked in a faint voice.

"Lady," Jeff said, "if you wasn't so stubborn, you'd know. I got beat up today for suggestin' that Murray Lowden was crooked. Tonight I'm goin' to prove it to you."

And then Linnet said the last thing Jeff had expected. "Are you hurt?"

"Only my feelin's," Jeff growled. "Now get in that buckboard."

"But I haven't any wraps."

"You take my coat. There's a robe there. And take my mittens. You'll be warm enough."

It seemed that Linnet wasn't going to argue, and Jeff was relieved. He had pictured himself driving one-handed down a twisting road while with his free arm he tried to keep a frantic woman from jumping off into the snow.

As it was, all Linnet said was: "Jeff Bleeker, this doesn't make sense. Why are you doing all this? Can't you leave us in peace?"

To which Jeff replied, "No ma'am."

Soon Jeff had other things to occupy him. He began to worry for fear he might unknowingly take the turn into Meeker's Canyon, and the thought of what might happen if he did, turned him cold. He looked obliquely at Linnet. She was huddled up close to him, her hands folded under the blanket. Jeff looked away quickly, resisting the temptation to take her into his arms.

When the road began to slant downward, Jeff peered ahead into the darkness and said softly, "Here's the place. Get down quiet and untie them two saddle horses." He paused, a suspicion in his glance that Linnet could not see. "You wouldn't run away from me, would you, lady?"

"I would not," Linnet said firmly. "Any man that wants to prove something as bad as you do should be given a hearing."

When the horses were untied, Jeff wrapped the reins about the seat spring, then cut them off short. With these as a whip, he started in on the mules. Within a hundred yards, they knew the driver meant business, and broke into a long gallop. Jeff stayed with them a few seconds longer, bringing the reins down with long slashing blows. Then he jumped, landing and rolling over in a bank of snow.

On the road once more, he made his way back to Linnet. She was standing there, holding the horses. He paused beside her to listen.

And then, far down the canyon, a sudden burst of gunfire roared into the night. They could see the pin-point gun flashes winking out on each side of the road. Distant yells reached their ears, and Linnet recognized the strident voice of Murray Lowden.

Jeff looked down at the girl. "Well?"

"Let's ride," Linnet said in a low voice.

They went back up the road, Linnet silent. She no longer sat erect, and to Jeff it almost seemed as if the night had crushed her. He began to wonder if she really did love Murray Lowden. Well, it was out of his hands now. If they persisted in selling the mine to Lowden, then it was because they went into it with their eyes open, willing to take the chance.

Linnet said suddenly, "Thanks, Jeff."

Jeff murmured something. Suddenly, he was aware that Linnet was crying. He pulled up and said, "What's the matter, girl?"

"N-nothing," Linnet stammered. "Only, Murray planned to kill you!"

IV.

The camp was in an uproar when, just at daylight, Jeff and Linnet rode in. Linnet had to use a sharp tongue to keep Doug and the others from beating Jeff up. Murdo was away scouring the hills, almost frantic with the fear that Linnet had been kidnaped.

Linnet asked Jeff in and she went immediately to the kitchen to get breakfast. A messenger was sent to find Murdo and tell him Linnet had returned.

But if Jeff thought Linnet was going to talk about the happenings of the night, he was mistaken. She was pale and quiet, and Jeff was just as silent. He wanted to leave now, immediately, but he wanted even more to see Murdo and talk to him. What was the Happy Day going to do to protect itself, now that Murray Lowden was unmasked? He had to talk to Murdo and warn him to prepare.

He wandered down toward the shaft house, his impatience eating at him. If he didn't clear out of here and clear out soon, Murray Lowden's gunnies would be after him.

It was midmorning by the time he emerged from the shaft house and started back for the shack. Almost to its door, a sound attracted him and he wheeled.

There, already in the clearing, was Sheriff Tim Morehead, ten of his gunnies, and Murray Lowden.

Linnet appeared at the door, her face pale and tense. She gave a startled cry at the sight of the visitors, then fell silent as Lowden rode up.

He was smiling as he doffed his hat. "Mornin', Linnet." He gestured to Morehead. "The sheriff and I found we were traveling to the same place this mornin', so we came together." He dismounted and stepped aside. "Get your business over first, sheriff," he said. "I can wait."

Morehead dismounted now and came over to Jeff. "My business won't take long," he said gruffly. "Mister, you're wanted for murder."

"Haven't I heard that before?"

"Likely," Morehead sneered. He reached in his pocket and brought out a slip of paper. "This came in on this mornin's train." He unfolded it and handed it to Jeff. It was a reward dodger offering five thousand dollars for the capture, dead or alive, of Jeff Bleeker. The dodger had been issued from

Cheyenne. The description was accurate, and they had only missed his weight by two pounds.

Morehead said, "You'll notice it's even got scars mentioned there. Says you got a deep one low down on the back of your neck, another on your left elbow." He stepped forward. "Let me look."

Jeff's face was dark with fury. It was suicide to argue with Morehead and these men, however, so he let Morehead pull down the collar of his shirt.

"It's there," Morehead said grimly. "See, miss?"

"I see," Linnet said coldly.

"Now your elbow," Morehead said.

Jeff pulled up his sleeve, showing the marks. Of course, that day when Morehead had burst into his room while he was shaving was the clew to all this. With his sleeves rolled up and his shirt collar turned down, the scars had been visible to anybody who cared to look. It clinched the reward dodger, gave it an appearance of authenticity that a man couldn't deny.

"Didn't mention my grizzly bear marks, did it?" Jeff drawled. "You could easy have got them in when you had the dodger printed this mornin'."

His glance shuttled to Lowden, who looked faintly amused.

"Funny, ain't it?" Jeff asked him.

Lowden shrugged. "My good man, don't blame me because your crimes have caught up with you. Personally, I think Sheriff Morehead has done a good piece of work."

"Who has?" Jeff asked.

"Morehead."

"You have, you mean," Jeff said angrily. Lowden only looked blankly at him.

Linnet said suddenly, "What do you want, Murray?"

"I've come up here with the new deed," Lowden said.

"Dad isn't here and won't be today. I think you're wasting your time," Linnet added. "Now and forever."

Lowden scowled. "You mean your dad isn't going to sell?"

"Not to you. But you might ask him."

Murray shrugged. "I'll come back when you're in a better humor, my dear."

Linnet ignored him. "What are you going to do with Jeff?" she asked Morehead.

"Ship him back to Cheyenne."

"Let's see that dodger."

Morehead gave it to her. Linnet read it, then rubbed her thumb over the printing. The ink smeared because it was still fresh.

Jeff thought he saw a fleeting change in her expression, but she only said, "Good day," and shut the door in their faces.

Jeff made an attempt to follow her, but Morehead whipped a gun into his stomach and growled, "None of that, hombre. Come along."

Lowden smiled faintly, but said nothing as he headed for his horse. Jeff tramped through these silent men, his thoughts bitter. He had risked his life for her, and now she walked out on him, without so much as a good-by! This girl . . . this girl he loved, had done that! For he did love her. He wasn't going to fool himself any longer. She was the reason for his staying here, for taking beatings, for lying, for all of it. Linnet Sayles! And she'd walked out on him!

He climbed into the saddle of the horse Morehead had provided for him.

"These stirrups are short," he complained.

Lowden said, from beside him, "Don't worry. You won't ride far enough to have it trouble you."

Jeff whipped his glance to Lowden. "What do you aim to do with me?"

"When we're out of gunshot of the house, you'll see," Lowden said quietly.

So Linnet had let him walk into a beefing, hadn't even protested, hadn't fought to save the life of a man who had risked his own for her! He hung his head as they rode out of the clearing, too bewildered and hurt to think of escape.

Lowden's voice roused him. "You're a clever devil, Bleeker, but you don't know what you're buckin'. What was the idea of that empty buckboard last night? What did it get you?"

Jeff said jeeringly, "It proved to Linnet Sayles and her father that you're as crooked as a corkscrew, Lowden."

Lowden laughed. "Is that why she was so haughty?"

"Yeah. That's why."

Lowden laughed. "Well, I was foolish to try it this way to begin with. I'll just take the mine, now."

They turned a sharp bend in the road where it arced above a deep canyon. Before him and behind him, as well as on both sides of him, there were men. Desperately, he cast about for a way to escape, any way.

It was hopeless. He couldn't snatch a gun from them, for they'd cut down on him in a second. He couldn't make a run for it because the way was blocked.

This was it, then, death by bushwhack.

And then, from the steep sheer of the bank to the right of them, a voice called down in stentorian tones, "Stop where you are and throw down those guns!"

Every man in the sheriff's crowd looked up at the bank. There, in a long line, where a dozen rifles slanting down at them. Suddenly it came to Jeff what had happened. Linnet had run for the shaft house, roused out the crew, armed them, and ordered them to cut over the hill and fort up on the road where it cut deeply back to avoid the canyon.

For one tense second no one spoke, and then Lowden yelled, "Fight!"

On the heel of his order, Jeff exploded out of the saddle, the short stirrups giving him leverage. He lunged into Lowden, who was on the side bordering the canyon. The impact of his thrust carried the outlaw leader out of the saddle, and they landed on their sides, just on the edge of the cliff.

A clatter of gunfire burst from above. With one desperate shove, Jeff pushed Lowden and himself over the edge. He held tightly to his man as they started to roll. The slope was of loose shale, smooth as glass, and there was nothing to stop their slide.

A quarter of the way down, Lowden fought free and started to slug. He tried to gain his knees, but Jeff dove into him again. Over and over they went, picking up momentum, until Jeff became dizzy. But he hung on grimly, clawing under Lowden's coat in an effort to get his gun.

And then their pace slackened and Jeff started to slug. Lowden, on his back, made a grab for his gun, at the same time pushing Jeff away from him.

He staggered to his knees, but Jeff sprang at him again and began chopping at his face with short, savage blows.

He landed one uppercut that lifted Lowden backward and sent him spinning down to the flat. Jeff went after him, and leaped on him just as Lowden's gun cleared its holster. They fought to their feet, Lowden trying to drag his gun up, Jeff fighting to keep it down.

Jeff's hand worked downward till it gripped the barrel of the gun. He put his whole weight on the weapon, slowly forcing Lowden to his knees.

And then Lowden, his strength conquered, resorted to trickery. He shifted his weight, throwing Jeff backward over his knee. Jeff felt himself going and gave one last vicious wrench to the gun. It came free as he sprawled on his back.

Lowden lunged at him in a long dive. Jeff raised both legs, met the impact of the heavy body, and held it off that split second necessary to get the gun in his fist. And then, as Lowden fell on him, Jeff shot.

Lowden was so close to him that the gun flash set fire to his shirt. Jeff heard a grunt, and saw an expression of surprise flick over the man's face.

And then Lowden crumpled.

Jeff crawled out from under him and heaved himself to his feet, panting. He turned at a sound, and saw Linnet running toward him.

Automatically, he opened his arms, and she was in them, sobbing.

"Darling!" she cried in a choked voice. "Are you all right?"

Jeff stammered something as he hugged her.

"Did you think I deserted you, Jeff?" Linnet murmured. "I had to!"

"Sure, honey," Jeff murmured.

Suddenly, Linnet pulled away from him and stooped down to pick up something. It was the shield of a deputy United States marshal.

"Is this—is—" She looked at him.

"Mine," Jeff said, flushing a little. "Anybody could bluff with a shield, honey. I had to put up the goods or get run out, and I was out to clean this county."

Linnet only smiled and came into his arms again. The firing up on the road had ceased, and Murdo, standing on the brim of the canyon wall, called down to them that Morehead was dead.

Linnet snuggled deeper into Jeff's arms.

"Dad got back to the mine just in time to come with us," she explained. "He thinks you're fine, Jeff, and was wondering if—"

"And what do you think?" Jeff interrupted.

"I think you're wonderful," she whispered, adding suddenly, "Do you love me, Jeff?" Then, before he could answer, she said, "Of course you do! I've known it all along."

"You waited long enough to tell me," Jeff answered. But he was smiling as he bent down to kiss her.

THE END.

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WIDE OPEN FOR A RUCKUS

By Harry Sinclair Drago

Cattle stood helpless, bawling their hunger, in the zero cold of the Two Medicine country, and men had to fight grimly to save them—but could they save themselves?

I.

"THEY smell water!" old Stony called back through the dust as the herd began to move faster. "The three of us won't be able to hold 'em if they git spooky!"

"Let 'em go!" Lance Cantrell yelled. "You and the Kid just try to keep 'em bunched till we hit the creek! We'll hold up there for a spell!"

It brought Stony flashing back to him, eyes snapping.

"Lance, are you crazy?" the old man demanded shrilly. "The Skull's closed to us! You're askin'

fer trouble and plenty of it if you try to water this bunch at the Crossin'!"

"That's exactly what we're doin'," Cantrell said flatly. "Pull away!"

As fall drives went in this Two Medicine country, the even two hundred head of beef steers that he and his rag-tag outfit were pushing toward Buffalo Flat this morning didn't amount to much. But Lance Cantrell was proud of the showing he was making.

As he hazed the stragglers along, not even the clouds of biting dust nor the promise of trouble could rub out of his eyes his honest satisfaction with what that herd represented. Fighting every inch of the way, he had come back from nowhere, after men had said he was licked. If he was on his feet again, or soon would be, he owed no one his thanks, save himself and the two range misfits who rode with him today.

The steers had their heads down and their tails up in the air by now. On the dead run they hit the Skull, lashing the quiet waters of the creek to spray for a moment. With a bellow of satisfaction, they moved out into the stream until they were belly-deep in water.

Slowly the dust began to settle. Sitting his bronc in the middle of the creek, the tow-headed Grubline Kid wrapped a faded overall-clad leg around his saddlehorn and built himself a cigarette.

"Well, we're here, boss," he grinned, "and it sure looks like we wuz goin' to have company."

Cantrell flicked a glance over his shoulder and saw a rider pounding across the Sash 8 range. "I'll do the talkin'," he said quietly.

Stony Roberts had stiffened in his saddle. "We ain't takin' nuthin' off this gent—if that's the way you want to play it," he stated.

The Kid nodded, alert, tense, ready for anything.

If Cantrell smiled, it was only because he knew how truly they meant it. Stony was gnarled with rheumatism and only the shell of the hell-roarin' cow prod who once had made history in the Two Medicines; as for the Kid, shiftless, discredited, he had worked for every outfit in the valley and had never been able to stick anywhere until Lance had taken him on.

Considering the poor, sometimes uncertain pay, with a man often doing the normal work of three hands, it was strange how that pair had come through for him. Strange, if one overlooked Cantrell's part in it.

"I was hopin' this would be Plat Wheeler himself," Cantrell said as he recognized the oncoming rider. Sharp disappointment edged his words.

"Joe Buxton, his foreman," Stony observed. "I'd know him a mile off."

The Crossing was in plain sight from the Sash 8 house. Little went on there that Buxton failed to see. This morning he was in the saddle before Cantrell's steers reached the Skull. He came racking up to the creek on an ornery-eyed bronc a few minutes later. He knew Cantrell and the two men riding for him, and they knew him, but no sign or word of greeting passed between them.

Buxton sized up the steers with a practiced eye and could not completely hide his surprise. Cantrell read his thought.

"Two hundred head, Buxton," he said, his tone quietly taunting. "They'll average up to thirteen hundred pounds and all grade good to A-one."

His laugh had a rasping, chilling quality. "Cattle do well on spring water—if you can get enough of it. The creek's a novelty to 'em. They didn't know there was that much water in the world."

Buxton understood him. Rage whipped through the man, but he held it down. "You're shippin' early, ain't you?" he inquired thinly.

"A man does a lot of things when he needs cash," was the easy answer.

"Like usin' another man's water," Buxton shot back. "Get your stuff out of here, Cantrell!"

Cantrell shook his head. "Joe, I didn't think you'd be touchy about a little thing like this—considerin' how much water Sash 8 stole from me."

Buxton's leathery visage corded. He knew how to handle men who lost their tempers, but Cantrell's quietly mocking tone was too much for him.

"Once a fool, always a fool!" he exploded. "You'd think after three years that you'd have got a little sense into your head! Nobody stole your water!"

"So you're surprised that I'm still bitter after three years, eh?" Lance retorted. "Well, I'll feel the same way about it twenty years from now. And I know seven or eight others who got the same deal and feel the same way about it. And don't kid yourself that Plat Wheeler didn't steal our water. He got it nice and legal, but he stole it."

"Sure!" Buxton snorted sarcastically. "A bunch of halfwits use water for years without even tryin' to file on it, and when they find that it belonged to another man all those years, they say he stole it!"

He was shaking with anger. For fifteen years he had ridden for Plat Wheeler, and he was all Sash 8, right, wrong, or otherwise, from his toes to the top of his bald head. "You git your stuff movin', or I'll have it moved for you!"

"Quit bluffin'," Cantrell advised. "If that had been your game, you wouldn't have come alone. I happen to know that Plat doesn't want any more trouble; he wants to forget. Well, he'll find that I've got a long memory!"

Buxton glared at him for a moment, his lean face working. Cantrell had put his finger on a sore point with him; Plat Wheeler *was* anxious to let bygones be bygones. He owned a bank now, and old grudges weren't good for business. At least that was his

excuse. But Buxton wasn't a man to be backed down. He wheeled his pony suddenly.

"I've had my say," he declared. "Now I'm goin' to show you what one of my bluffs looks like when it's called!" Without another word, he raked his mount with the spurs and raced away at a slashing gallop. Old Stony shook his head as he gazed after him.

"Lance, you went too far," he said. "You told him off, but what did it git you?"

"Just a little cheap satisfaction. But it was worth it."

"Mebbe yo're right," Stony muttered. "Well, seein' as you've had yore fun, we better git these critters movin'. They ought to go along as gentle as kittens now."

"Yeah," Cantrell agreed. "Our next stop will be the bed grounds outside Buffalo Flat."

The town hove into view in the early afternoon. They found they had the bed grounds to themselves, but the fresh droppings told Cantrell he was not the only one shipping early this fall.

"You hold the stuff here," he told his men. "I'll ride in and see about the shippin' pens and have a talk with Brack. If there's any room we'll drive in before evenin'."

To his surprise, he found the railroad corrals deserted. A string of empty stock cars stood on the siding.

"Room to spare," he said to himself. Instead of stopping to confer with the agent, he rode down Buffalo Flat's main street to Ben Brack's office.

Brack was a stock buyer and maintained a board in his place on which the livestock quotations were marked up as they came off the wire.

II.

Cantrell found a number of horses racked in front of the establishment, and as he stepped through the door he was further surprised to find the little room crowded with stockmen, most of them owners of spreads no bigger than his own.

Standing in front of the board, however, watching as Brack copied some figures from a telegram, stood Plat Wheeler, stocky, ruddy of face and neck and somehow impregnable-looking. The fact that he was now a banker as well as a cowman had not caused him to alter his appearance a whit. He had always been a dusty, hard-riding rangeman, and, so far as his years would allow, still was.

Three or four men jerked a cheerless greeting at Cantrell. The tension in the room began to get to him.

"What's wrong, Dutch?" he asked the man nearest him. Dutch Thieson pointed to the blackboard, hand trembling.

"Look at dem figures, Lance! *Gott in himmel!* I guess you know where sellin' beef at dem brices will take you!"

A groan froze on Cantrell's lips as Brack put down his chalk and stepped back from the board. Slowly he reread the day's closing prices in Chicago. The figures were for dollars per hundred pounds. Prime weight steers had brought only two dollars and thirty-five cents; yearlings had gone for ten cents under that.

It was incredible. Prices had been low for two years, but never anything like this. It passed belief. Less freight and Brack's commission, it meant that Cantrell would receive under twenty-five dollars a head for his steers—less than half of what he had confidently expected to get.

"You ain't seein' things, Cantrell," Perry English called across the room to him. "That's the price! The bottom's dropped out of the market and we're left holdin' the bag as usual!"

Others echoed his feeling.

"It'll wipe us out," big Jeff Kendrick declared with an oath. "When we lost our water, we managed to get by with a few springs and the like. There ain't no gettin' by when a gang of cutthroats back East use hard times to hammer the prices down like that." He raised his voice and addressed himself to Plat Wheeler. "You got my water, Wheeler. Next spring you can take my ranch! I'll never be able to meet the mortgage!"

"I guess that'll be the case with more than one of us," Link Heaton agreed. "You always wanted all this Two Medicine range for yourself, Wheeler. I reckon you'll have it now."

Old Plat had not said a word. He said nothing now as he continued to study the figures on the board. He knew exactly what these men thought of him; knew they hated him. No sign of what he was thinking was reflected on his frozen countenance.

"It ain't the first panic we've had," Ben Brack put in. He had a stake here, and he didn't propose to lose it. "The market is low, but that ain't no reason it won't go lower. The sooner you ship, the better, I'd say."

Plat spoke now, and he didn't have to raise his voice to make himself heard. "Your advice don't sound good to me, Brack. I'm not shippin' a steer," he said. "I'll hold my stuff over till spring. The market will come back."

"Maybe it will," Brack answered quickly. "But it may be a year or two doing it. You don't know and neither do I."

"I'll take a twenty-five-thousand-dollar gamble that I know," Plat said flatly. "I'm not interested in runnin' cattle to keep you and the railroad in business." He turned to the crowd. "You men are fools if you sell now. It don't cost much to carry a steer over. Chances are we'll have an open winter. If we don't, and you have to buy hay, well, there's plenty of it and it's cheap."

There was approval of this from some. They were not the ones who owed money at the bank.

"You can suit yourselves," Plat grumbled, starting for the door.

He had taken only a step when Cantrell ranged up to him. This was not the first time they had met face to face since the courts had placed Sash 8 in complete possession of Skull Creek. The bitterness and acrimony of those past meetings rode them now.

"I don't like your advice any better than Brack's," Cantrell said. "My stuff is out on the bed grounds this minute. Thanks to you, I can't wait till next April for money. God knows your bank won't wait when my note falls due!"

"My bank ain't different than any other bank!" Plat snapped. "You've called me some hard names in the past, Cantrell, and I don't expect you to change your tune now, though I never asked you or any other man for more than my rights. But I'll do this for you, and it goes for whoever wants to take me up: I'll contract to pay you forty-five dollars a head for prime beef steers next April first, delivered here in the Flat; and I'll advance you up to fifty percent on them."

The crowd was stunned for a moment.

"I'm not doin' this just as a favor," Plat continued, as if he did not want to be misunderstood. "I expect to make a profit. Steers will most likely be bringin' nearer fifty-five than forty-five dollars next spring. If they're not, that'll be my hard luck."

Dutch Thieson heaved himself to his feet. "Wheeler, is dere a trick in dis somewheres?"

"Sure there's a trick in it!" Brack burst out, seeing his business about to be ruined. "Wheeler will want security. You'll put up your ranches to cover him."

"I'll want security all right," Plat agreed, "but there's no trick in that. I understand your position, Brack. I hate to step on your toes, but this country can get along without you. It can't get along with busted cowmen."

He stamped out, leaving confusion behind him. No two men were of the same opinion regarding his offer, though all were suspicious of it. In the end they turned to Cantrell. His steers were in town; he would have to make the first decision.

"Old Blat's a grook," Thieson warned. "He'll trim you!"

"I'm not so sure about that," was Cantrell's surprising answer.

"You mean you're goin' to take him up?" Brack demanded in hoarse amazement.

"You bet I'll do business with him. And so will the rest of us!" Cantrell said with conviction. "Wheeler expects to make a profit out of our misfortune, but it's a way out—and we'll take it!"

"Lance is right," big Jeff Kendrick agreed. "It don't cost twenty dollars to carry a steer over, and that's about the margin Plat is offerin' us."

"You'll be sorry," Brack warned, but it was only a half-hearted argument. He knew mighty few steers would be shipped that fall, and his agile brain was already busy in other directions.

Cautious little Perry English walked down the street with Cantrell. "Lance," he said, "you fell in too quickly with Plat's offer. You've got something up your sleeve. What is it?"

"Nothin' more than a feelin' that it's better than just a way out for us." A bitter smile touched Lance Cantrell's mouth. "When a man never thinks of anythin' but a profit, he always oversteps himself sooner or later. Let Wheeler get his money tied up in four to five thousand steers that he's obligated to take at forty-five dollars. When April first rolls around he may find himself with more than a headache on his hands."

It swung Perry English into line. He repeated Cantrell's line of reasoning to other men, and it had the same effect. Three days later Joe Buxton rode into town with the tale and told it to old Plat. The old man nodded. Hands laced behind his back, he walked to the window and stared up and down the street for a long, moody moment.

"It's a terrible thing to be hated right and left, Joe," he murmured abstractedly. Buxton stared at him with incredulous eyes. It was the first time he could recall that Plat had been interested in what men thought of him.

"You shouldn't have given them an inch," he said. "They won't thank you for it."

Plat rolled his frayed cigar to the side of his mouth.

"You'll have to let me handle this my own way, Joe," he said thoughtfully.

The following morning he rode to Tine Gallup's hay ranch on Pole Creek.

"Not countin' what I put up, how much hay is there in the country this fall?" he asked. Gallup did some counting with his fingers.

"Between me, the Bonta boys, Sam Stock, and what little Ed Decker's got, I'd say about eight hundred tons. I've got about half of it."

"What's it worth?"

"Brack was quotin' five dollars last week, put aboard the cars."

"I'll give you four in the stack," offered Plat. "The money will be waitin' for you at the bank. In the meantime I'll send three or four of my boys over here to look after it. You can send me a bill for their keep later on."

Gallup eyed him shrewdly for a moment. "You expectin' trouble? I don't want to let myself in for—"

"There won't be any trouble." Plat cut him off. "I just want to be sure the hay is here when I need it."

Gallup had heard a thing or two; he did a little thinking. "You want this business kept quiet?"

"Pah!" Plat snorted. "If I wanted it kept quiet, I wouldn't be sendin' my men over here to look after it, would I?"

III.

News that Tine Gallup's hay now belonged to Sash 8 got around in a hurry. To men already apprehensive of trouble, it had a sinister aspect. It brought Perry English and Thieson pounding up to Cantrell's door in the early morning.

Dutch was so furious he could only sputter incoherently. Perry did the talking, which was fitting, for he was head of the stockmen's association.

Cantrell found the tale serious enough, but he refused to be stampeded by it.

"I wouldn't get too excited about this," he advised. "We haven't had to buy any hay for two or three winters. If we need a little this year, it will be a godsend to be able to get it right here in the valley."

"Und bay three or four times what it's worth?" Dutch roared. "Dat's his game! I told you he was a grook! Demmit, I wish I never lissen to you!"

"Don't blow up that way," Cantrell told him. "There's other places you can buy hay."

"I'm afraid not," said Perry. "Figuring I'd play it safe, I tried to buy a little. I went the round. The Bonta boys and the others aren't selling. Chances are they've already sold and are just holding the stuff."

It left Cantrell with little to say. The two men did not remain long. As they were riding away, with Dutch still raging, old Stony and the Kid rode in. They followed Cantrell into the house.

"What's Dutch got under his skin?" Stony asked.

He whistled his surprise when Lance told him. "I can top that," he said.

"What do you mean?" Cantrell demanded, anxiety riding him.

"The red bull and a couple cows drifted all the way over to the Bonta place. We found them feedin' on the stubble." Stony wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Lot of activity over there this mornin'. Balin' hay and freightin' it to town. Ben Brack is bossin' the job."

"Brack?" Cantrell demanded, his face suddenly hard and flat. "Then Perry was right! Those two pirates have got together! If we need hay we'll pay through the nose for it!"

He flung himself into a coat.

"Come on, Kid," he said. "We're goin' to see Ed Decker. If Brack has bought his hay, Ed'll tell me. I've got to know about this."

The trip only confirmed his fears. Between them, Plat Wheeler and Ben Brack had cornered all the hay in sight.

"Boss, there's ways of persuadin' a gent to change his mind," the Grubline Kid observed dryly. "There's a lot of argument in the business end of a .45."

"I'm afraid that medicine wouldn't work in this case," Cantrell muttered. "We'll sit tight and hope to God we have an open winter. It's all we can do."

That hope grew on him as the snows held off. November was well along before the first storm struck. It snowed to a depth of ten inches on the level, but a warm wind carried the snow off two days later. It happened repeatedly in the weeks before Christmas.

Snow in itself was no great hardship for stock in this bunch-grass country. In winter the nutritious part of the grass was the tops, for, unlike so many varieties, it held its seeds until spring. With the grass standing erect on its stiff stalks, a range-bred steer could paw down to it without difficulty and actually grow fat on it. But ice was a different matter.

Just before the first of the year the weather turned mild for a day or two. Stony and the Kid rode in through a driving rain one night.

"The stuff is all bunchin' up in the ravines and coulees," Stony told Cantrell. "We're goin' to git a change in the weather."

The change came before morning. The rain turned to sleet. For ten hours it lashed the house, freezing as it struck. The following day it snowed and rained by turn. At night the temperature fell, locking the grass under a sheet of ice.

"It won't last," Cantrell told his men. "It never does."

He was mistaken. The mercury dropped to zero and lower, and it stayed there. And out on the range the cattle stood bunched in the coulees, helpless, bawling their hunger.

In town, Ben Brack walked into Plat Wheeler's office at the bank. At best he was an infrequent visitor, his trade going to another institution down the street. He was careful to close the door behind him. Plat gave him a frosty stare.

"Well, I guess it's about time we start to collect, Plat," Brack began, unabashed by the coolness of his reception.

"I didn't know we had any business together," was the blunt response.

"No?" Brack laughed unpleasantly. "Between us we happen to own all the hay in the country. I was offered nine dollars for some this mornin'. It didn't interest me. Nine dollars is only the beginnin'. We can run the price up to twenty if we stick together."

Plat's face went from an apoplectic red to ashen gray. Swinging himself around violently in his swivel chair he brought his booted feet down with an angry bang. A battle seemed to be raging within him. Several times he started to speak, only to check himself. Finally he flung away his cigar and turned to Brack, a freezing contempt in his cold blue eyes.

"Brack, I always knew you were just a cheap little chiselin' tinhorn. But I didn't think you were fool enough to come runnin' to me with a proposition. I always play my own hand, and I'm playin' it now. When a man gits in my way, and I like him as little as I like you, I do something about it. The price of loose hay in Buffalo Flat this mornin' is four-and-a-half a ton, six dollars baled! If you want to get out from in under, here's your chance!"

Brack stared at him with a slowly deepening sneer on his lips. "Still a hog, eh?" he growled. "You want it all! Well, it don't go, Wheeler! I've got your number; I'm sittin' tight!"

"Git out!" The cattleman's voice rose to a bellow. "Git out!"

Suddenly he reached across his desk, caught Brack by the collar of his coat and ran him out into the main room of the bank. He didn't stop until he had flung Brack into the street. Panting heavily, he turned to face the cashier and his assistant. They were the only ones in the bank at the moment.

"That skunk has run the price of hay up to nine dollars," he burst out. "Can one of you boys paint a sign?"

Charlie Loomis, the assistant cashier, said he could.

"Well, do it right away. Put it in the window. Just say, 'Hay, three dollars a ton. Information inside.'"

He started back to his office. Suddenly he stopped.

"No, don't do it!" he rasped. "Just forget it. I got my price, too, and I can't git it that way!"

He came out of his office a few minutes later, bundled up in an old sheepskin coat, his hat crammed down on his head.

"I'm goin' out to the ranch," he announced. "I may not be in for a day or two. If anyone wants to see me, send 'em out there."

Cantrell was just sitting down to breakfast when a man brought a message from Perry English. There was to be a special meeting of the association in town at noon. "Perry says to be sure to be there," the man said.

"I'll be on hand," Cantrell promised.

The rider left at once.

"Things must be bad all over," Stony remarked, his old face sober. "I know some of our stuff is gittin' purty shaky. It'll be boggin' down on us unless we git somethin' inside it soon."

"Hoofs goin' bad, too," the Kid muttered. "They been standin' on ice for four days now."

Cantrell nodded grimly. He knew just how bad things were. "You boys divide what cut feed we've got here and take half of it out to the big coulee with you," he said. "It won't go far, and it means our saddle stuff will be on short rations; but it's the best we can do. Better take an ax and shovel with you and see if you can't break up some of that crust."

When Cantrell arrived at the hall above the Buffalo Flat Mercantile Company's store, he found every seat taken, save the one Plat Wheeler used to occupy. Plat had attended no meetings since the bitter fight for the waters of Skull Creek. This special session had not yet been called to order, and, judging by the temper of the crowd it was not interested in parliamentary law or any other brand of orderly procedure. Cantrell realized, the moment he stepped into the room, that there were men here who held him responsible for the predicament in which they found themselves.

"Now we hear what to do," Dutch Thieson called out sarcastically. "Cantrell always has blenty to say."

"Shut up, Dutch!" big Jeff Kendrick growled. "You ain't no worse off than the rest of us. I don't need you or Cantrell or anyone else to tell me what we ought to do. A couple of good funerals is what this country needs."

"One will satisfy me!" Link Heaton rasped. "That little rat, Brack, is only tryin' to gouge us on the hay, but that ain't Wheeler's game! He's out to git us comin' and goin'! If we pay sixteen dollars for hay—and that's what I paid Brack this mornin'—we go bust! You can't feed sixteen-dollar hay to forty-five-dollar steers and do anythin' else! But we got to pull our stuff through! We contracted to deliver so many! If we ain't got any, if most of 'em die, what are we goin' to do next April?"

"We'll be moved off our places," Cantrell answered him. "But you didn't help yourself any by buying a few tons of hay this mornin'. The only way we can beat this game is to agree that we won't buy an ounce of it. Buy at sixteen dollars today and it'll be eighteen tomorrow."

That made sense to some. Perry English got the meeting started. When they adjourned an hour later, they had agreed not to buy any hay for the present.

"A chinook will save us," English told them. "It's not too early to look for one. But unless there's a break in the weather, there'll be another meeting at my place on Friday night."

Cantrell rode out of town with English. Neither had much to say. Finally Perry spoke.

"I'm afraid this is going to end in violence," he said. "It won't take much to send Thieson, Reb Smiley, and three or four others into a gun play or lynching. I noticed Sheriff Tasker was around getting an earful."

"I saw Tasker," Lance murmured woodenly. "He better keep out of this. No matter what happens, we'll have to stick together."

IV.

Soon after Cantrell reached the ranch, Stony and the Kid came in. Old Stony had a calf sprawled across his knees. It was a first calf that had been dropped very late. For some reason it had never done well.

"She's about gone, I reckon," Stony said. "Figgered we might pull her through if I brought her in."

The two men carried the calf into the barn. Cantrell made a warm mash and doped it up with a little whiskey.

It was nine o'clock before the three men sat down to supper. The Kid and Stony were hungry. They ate hurriedly and without speaking. Finished, they sat around the kitchen stove, Stony puffing his pipe and the Kid drawing on a cigarette.

"Nuthin' so dumb as a cow," the Kid said out of a long silence, "but somehow they don't look so dumb when they're starvin' an' they look at yuh with their big eyes."

"Yeah," Stony muttered. "Certainly some things around here that need squarin'."

"Don't worry, they will be," Cantrell told him.

The weather moderated some, but though the icy covering that sheathed the range melted a little at noon, it set up again as soon as the sun sank. When Cantrell rode back to the house on Friday evening he knew the situation was desperate. He did not have to wait until he reached Perry English's spread to know that some action would be taken tonight.

He found the house full of men. If they had less to say than at the last meeting, it was only because they were more determined to do something. Perry tried to conduct the proceedings in the usual way, but Kendrick quickly took the play away from him.

"No sense in wastin' time on why-fors and whereases tonight!" Jeff thundered. "We want action! If you ain't afraid of a fight, we'll go to Pole Creek tomorrow night and make damned short work of Plat Wheeler's hay!"

Dutch met this suggestion with a howl of approval. "I'm retty to ride now!" he yelled.

"Saturday night will be better," Jeff insisted. "Some of Wheeler's men may go to town."

Cantrell looked around the room and realized that every man present, even the mild-mannered Perry, was ready to fall in with the plan.

"There'll be a gun fight, Jeff," he said.

"Well, what of it? Does that stop you?" The crowd held its breath at the sudden hostility in Kendrick's tone.

"It never has stopped me," Lance answered quietly, a cold smile playing over his lips.

The tension held as he and Kendrick stood there, facing each other.

"What's burnin' that hay goin' to get us?" The question came slowly off Cantrell's tongue. "You can't feed ashes to cattle."

"I'll tell you what it'll get us," Jeff shot at him. "It'll scare that other weasel out of his skin! Brack will be damned willin' to sell hay to us at a fair price!"

Cantrell could find no fault with that argument. And yet, with cattle starving, it seemed a monstrous thing to destroy the very hay that would save them.

The approval of the others emboldened Kendrick. He took a step toward Cantrell. "See here, Cantrell, we been pretty free with our talk. There's no straddlin' the fence now. You're either with us or agin' us. Just where do you stand?"

Cantrell stood there in the pin-drop silence, his shoulders free and his arms hanging loosely at his sides, calm, cool, and as alert as a cat. He bore Jeff no ill will. They had always been friends, and he was willing to make allowances for the strain the last few days had put on the man. But there was a limit beyond which no one could go with him. That limit had been reached.

"Jeff," he said softly, "you ought to know better than to put anythin' up to me like that."

He didn't move a finger toward his gun. Something in the power of his eyes alone shackled Kendrick. "Forget it," Jeff said with a heavy sigh. "I didn't mean to crowd you but—"

"It's all right, Jeff. I'm with you, right or wrong."

"Then you'll be at my place at nine o'clock tomorrow evenin'?"

Cantrell nodded. "I'll be there."

He saw enough on his own range the following day to sicken him. "No wonder Kendrick is half crazy," he thought. "A cowman can't see things like this and still keep his head."

He sent the Kid back to the house to fetch his rifle.

"Killin' some of 'em is the best thing to do, I reckon," Stony muttered gloomily. "Half a dozen are so far gone that nuthin' will save 'em. Tomorrow there'll be another bunch—"

"It ain't bein' cleaned out that hurts the worst," said Cantrell. "I've always been able to take whatever was handed me and come back fightin'. But handin' a deal like this to poor dumb critters that can't help themselves is more than I can stand. I don't see how a man who ever was a cowman can do such a thing."

It was after dark when they came in. Cantrell sat by the stove, a brooding silence on him. He had not bothered to remove his coat or chaps.

"Better peel off that stuff and I'll shake up some supper," Stony told him.

"Don't bother with supper for me," Cantrell answered, standing up. "Just have the Kid catch up a fresh pony."

Old Stony stared at him sharply for a moment. "Where you goin', Lance?"

"I'm goin' to Sash 8. I've got to see Wheeler."

V.

The Sash 8 crew had finished supper and gone back to the bunkhouse by the time Cantrell rode into the yard. A man came out of the house, however, and stood on the gallery watching him as he left his bronc at the rack. A ray of light struck Cantrell's face.

"What's on your mind?" asked the man in the shadow of the gallery. It was Joe Buxton, Plat's foreman. His tone was hostile.

"I want to see Wheeler," Lance replied.

"He ain't here. He might be out tonight, then again, he might not."

"I'll wait, if you don't mind."

Buxton, wary, suspicious, tested this unexpected situation in his mind for a moment. "Well, I guess you can wait in the office," he said. "Come on."

Plat's ranch office was a bare little room with only a desk and several chairs.

"Help yourself," Buxton invited with a wave of his hand. He stood in the doorway, studying Cantrell with a suspicious eye. "If it's anythin' to do with the ranch, you can do your talkin' to me."

"I'll have to see Wheeler," Cantrell answered.

Buxton went out, leaving the door open. A few moments later the ranch bell tolled several times. Cantrell knew it was Buxton, calling up some of the crew. Later, a guarded step on the gallery told him he was being watched through the window. "Buxton's a good foreman," he thought. "Thinks of everythin'."

Half an hour later a step sounded in the hallway. It was Buxton. His glance drilled into the visitor. "Havin' a long wait," he remarked. Ice couldn't have been colder than his tone.

Matching it to perfection, Cantrell said, "I don't mind."

Buxton jerked his head, said nothing and walked out. A few minutes later a light rig was driven into the yard. From the fragment of conversation that reached him, Lance knew Wheeler had arrived. He glanced at his watch. It was after seven thirty. "It won't take me long to have my say," he thought. "If I get away by eight I'll be at Kendrick's place in time."

Presently Plat stalked into the room, his face whipped raw by the long drive from town. Buxton came as far as the door and stood there waiting.

"You here to call me names, or have you got some business with me?" Plat demanded with his usual gruffness.

"There'll be no name callin' by me," said Cantrell. "On the other hand, I don't know that what I've got to say to you could be called business. Years ago—before you got rich—you used to be a cowman, runnin' a few steers like me. The hope that I might be able to talk to you on that basis brought me here."

Plat's immediate answer was only a narrowing of his cold blue eyes. He lowered himself into a chair then and told Buxton to leave. "Well, that's a fair enough beginnin'," he said, hunting for a cigar. "Go on, have your say."

"Before I do," said Cantrell. "I want to tell you I'm not here tryin' to beg off. You handed me a lickin' once before when I wasn't lookin', but I had my eyes open this time. I'll take whatever is comin' to me. When you made your proposition last fall, I thought I had you where I wanted you; that you'd be busted when April came around."

"Well?" Plat grunted.

"I didn't know how smart you were. I didn't figure that hay was goin' to be sixteen dollars a ton, that my goose would be cooked if I bought it and that I'd be washed up if I didn't."

Across the table old Plat stared at his visitor with hooded, inscrutable gaze. For the better part of five days he had caged himself up in this room, a brooding grizzly, expecting Cantrell, or one of the others, to ride in.

A word from him would have brought one of them, but he refused to send it. After all, he had his price, as he had said. But if no one came he had the news that Buxton and his punchers brought to keep him company. The blacker the news, the more he had paced the floor, and the less he had had to say.

Buxton had wondered. He had known Plat, in good temper and bad, for the major part of his life. He had long told himself that he understood the old man. The past few days had made him doubt it. And yet tonight, now that Cantrell was here, Plat was his calm, phlegmatic self. Gazing at his iron visage, Cantrell told himself he had been foolish to come.

"Among the other things you didn't figure was that I was goin' to fix the weather," Plat said with mirthless irony. He shook his head at some secret thought. "Cantrell, this may surprise you, but I've always admired you. You're a good worker and a good fighter. You're inclined to make the mistake, though, of bein' your own judge and jury. It's usually wise to wait until the evidence is all in before you reach a verdict."

"The evidence is in this time," Lance said with grim finality. "I had to shoot some steers this afternoon. Tomorrow another bunch will have to be killed. Other men are doin' it, too. If you grow

Through the smoke and embers of burning hay they heard it—the distant cracking of rifles!

up with cattle, you can't let 'em go on sufferin', dyin' by inches. It sort of gets you to see 'em stretched out, too weak to move, but followin' you with their eyes as though they figured you could do somethin' about it."

Something touched Plat's face that took some of the iron out of it. His cigar was cold in his mouth. He sucked at it noisily. "Well, why don't you do somethin' about it?" he ground out. "There's feed enough in the country twice over."

"Cows have been good to you, Wheeler," Cantrell continued, ignoring the interruption. "You grew up with 'em if ever a man did. I know you're hard, never givin' an inch when someone's buckin' you, but I've seen you fire a man for abusin' a horse. I don't suppose you'd admit it, but down inside you're human. I wouldn't be here if I didn't think so."

Plat thrust out his chin and his heavy brow bristled as fiercely as though he had just heard some foul aspersion on his character. Pushing back his chair, he glared at Cantrell as though he proposed to snap his head off. "Why . . . why—" he started to roar. The words wouldn't come. After breathing asthmatically for a few moments, he said in a voice that was strangely mild, "What is it you'd have me do?"

"Stop the misery and death that's stalkin' this range. I'm not askin' it for the men. I'm speakin' for the stock. Let me take word back tonight that you'll let us have some hay at a fair price."

Old Plat shook his head pityingly. "What fools hatred makes of men!" he murmured. He was stating a fact to himself rather than addressing Lance. Then, with an angry snort, he jerked himself to his feet. "Cantrell, has any man ever heard me say he couldn't have all the hay he needed at a fair price?" he lashed out furiously. "The answer is no, and you know it! No one has come to me except Brack, and I threw that rat-eyed weasel into the street when he tried to show me how easy it'd be for the two of us to bleed you men to the bone! I bought all that hay just so I'd be able to keep some dirty chiseler like him from shakin' you down!"

Cantrell had risen and stood staring at the old man, bewildered, tongue-tied.

"But what happened?" Plat rifled at him. "The minute that you and English and the rest of you heard that I'd bought it, you told yourselves that Wheeler was out to gouge you! And now you come here to tell me that cattle are sufferin', dyin'! Well, I'm here to tell you you can blame yourselves! That hay is there for you, and it's been there right along! The price is four-and-a-half a ton—what I paid for it!"

The truth stunned Cantrell. He attempted no alibi; the blame was squarely where Plat put it. Stubborn hatred and black suspicion, feeding on old grudges, had completely betrayed them.

"Don't stand there like that!" Plat boomed. "Say somethin'!"

"Plat—there's nothin' I can say to—"

Off in the house somewhere a clock struck eight. It broke the spell that gripped Cantrell. Across the valley at Kendrick's K Bar spread, men were gathering—armed, determined men. In another hour they would be heading for Pole Creek to destroy the very hay that was their salvation, if they but knew.

"My God," Cantrell cried, "we've got to stop them! That hay is goin' to be burned tonight! They're desperate! Once they pull away from Kendrick's place, nothin' will hold them back!"

VI.

There was iron in old Plat, and he proved it as he drew the facts from Cantrell. Honest indignation tore through him, but by sheer force of will he put it behind him. This was an emergency, calling for a cool head. In a voice that was deceivingly calm, he said, "You get goin' at once. Take Buxton with you. I'll follow as soon as I can roll out some of the crew. I don't care how you do it, but hold that bunch until I git there."

"I'll hold them if I have to gun herd them!" Cantrell promised as he swung out of the house. A few minutes later, he and Buxton rode away.

The treacherous going put a limit on what a man could ask of a horse. Buxton rode doggedly, head lowered against the knifing wind. Having been informed as to how matters stood, he had made no comment. If he found it strange that he should be siding Cantrell tonight, after their years of bitterness and enmity, he gave no sign of it. Lance was equally taciturn.

Topping the first low swell of the hills, they caught their first glimpse of Kendrick's place. It left them several miles to go. Cantrell knew that if they arrived in time it would be by a matter of minutes. Buxton gave him something to think about when, out of his long silence, he asked, "How sure are you that they'll wait till nine o'clock?"

He wasn't sure at all. Hotheads in that crowd, like Thieson or Reb Smiley, might easily have stampeded the others into heading for Pole Creek the moment they had men enough present to make the result fairly certain.

"If they've left, we'll try to overtake them," Lance told Buxton.

They were within a hundred yards of the house before the string of broncs tied to the rack told them they were in time. They slid out of their saddles a few moments later. Cantrell started for the door, Buxton a few steps behind him. As he struck the porch, the door opened and a dozen men poured out.

"Wait a minute!" Cantrell commanded. "I've got some news for you!"

"To hell with you and your waitin'!" Reb Smiley flung in his face. "We're sick of waitin'!"

"You said it!" echoed Dutch. "You come with us or get oud of the way!"

"Get back in the house," Cantrell gritted. "You're goin' to listen to me!"

Jeff Kendrick took a step forward and stopped. He saw then why Reb and Dutch had frozen in their tracks. "What do you mean, pullin' a gun on us, Cantrell?" he roared.

"Keep away from your ponies and get back inside!"

The men hesitated. Kendrick recognized Buxton then.

"Look!" he cried. "Joe Buxton! Why, Cantrell, you skunk, you've sold us out!"

The angry roar that boiled up from the crowd was proof enough that others thought as he did.

"Nobody's sold you out," Lance whipped out thinly. "You'll be lookin' for a hole to crawl into when you've heard what I've got to say."

"We'll listen to him and decide afterward what we want to do," said Perry English, always the most cautious and deliberate of them.

Slowly the men filed back into the house. Cantrell followed them in. Buxton remained at the door, his face dark with his thinking.

Lance wasted no time. "We've been all wrong about Wheeler! Burn that hay and we cut our own throats! It's ours—all we want of it—at four-and-a-half a ton!"

A bomb dropped in the room would have had about the same effect. Men fell back, staring at one another, amazed, dumfounded, their wrath stilled. But only for a moment. Their plight was too desperate, suspicion was too strong in them for Cantrell or any man to convince them by words alone that their deliverance was at hand. They wanted proof.

"Don't sound right to me," Kendrick ground out stubbornly. "Wheeler hears we're goin' to burn his hay, and he comes off his high perch in a hurry. If he wasn't tryin' to gouge us, why did he wait till now to say somethin'?"

"You're wrong!" Lance answered. "I didn't threaten him. You know Wheeler doesn't scare worth a cent!"

"Den why ain't he here?" Dutch demanded. "Why does he send you to do his talkin'?"

"No man has to do my talkin'!" a voice thundered from the doorway. The crowd swung around to find Plat Wheeler standing there. There was something indomitable about the old cattleman as he marched in and took his place beside Cantrell, and not a man failed to feel his force.

"Have you told 'em why I bought that hay?" Plat questioned.

"No, I figured that should come from you," Lance replied.

"Good! I can do it without wastin' any words." He looked at the crowd and spoke with a flicker of hesitation. "The Sash 8 crew is outside. But you don't have to worry about that. We ain't here to make war. If you want to move some hay tonight, we'll help you. But first, you listen to me!"

He repeated what he had told Cantrell. Long before he finished, men were shifting about nervously from one foot to the other, unable to deny their folly. Even stubborn Dutch Thieson could see that they had hated the wrong man, that Brack was their real enemy.

"The dirty, scheming rat!" Dutch cried. "Better we string him up and be done with him!"

"There's no time to bother with Brack now," Plat rasped. "Your stock comes first. I was told tonight that I used to be a cowman. Well, I'm still a cowman! I don't propose to wait until daylight to do somethin' about this. Git your wagons. I'll be waitin' for you on Pole Creek!"

A cheer broke from the crowd. Men rushed forward. Big Jeff Kendrick pushed them back. "Plat," he said soberly, "I ought to be hided for my part in this. You licked us to a finish in the water fight, but we wa'n't big enough to take it. We been hatin' you, waitin' to git even." He turned to Dutch and the others who once had used the waters of the Skull. "I don't know how you gents feel about it, but I for one want to bury the hatchet here and now!"

Dutch, Link Heaton, Perry—all save Cantrell, echoed his decision. Jeff swung around on Lance. The latter was staring out the window, dread stamped on his face.

"What is it?" Kendrick cried.

"Look! Look at that sky over west! There's a fire there, and it's a bad one!"

"That's Pole Creek—Gallup's place!" Heaton yelled. "It's either the house or the hay!"

"It ain't the house," Lance declared. "A house don't blaze that way."

"You're right!" Plat gritted. "It's the hay!"

Men ran to the doors and the windows, wrath boiling over in them. Last night Cantrell had reminded them that they couldn't feed ashes to cattle. More than one recalled the words as they stared at the red glow that stained the sky. To have the cup of hope offered them one moment, only to have it dashed away the next, was almost too much for them. Some cursed and others called down God's wrath on the guilty.

"Plat, you had part of your crew watchin' that hay!" Kendrick shouted across the room. "What in hell were they doin' to let this happen?"

"That's what I aim to find out!" the old man answered. "If only one stack has been fired we can git there in time to do somethin' about savin' the rest. But we'll have to hurry!"

They were rushing out of the house when Wheeler stopped Lance. "Cantrell, can you account for all your bunch?"

"They're all here! And thank God they are! When we get to the bottom of this, it won't be a job for the sheriff!"

But even as he was reassuring Wheeler, a dismaying thought struck Cantrell. It was true that all the association men were accounted for, but what if Stony and the Grubline Kid, harassed beyond endurance by the sufferings of the starving cattle and the thought of Wheeler's supposed injustice, had decided to take the law into their own hands? As he stood weighing the possibilities of such a thing, Perry English called to him to hurry, and Cantrell found his horse and mounted. No matter who was at the bottom of this, the important thing now was to concentrate on saving something from the fire.

Boots crunched on the frozen snow as men ran to their ponies, breath steaming as it struck the frosty air. Sash 8, seven strong, was already in the saddle. The moment Plat and Buxton were mounted, they rode away in a bunch, the others following after them.

It was three miles to Tine Gallup's hay ranch. Risking their necks, the men rode at a driving gallop. The freshening wind was in their faces. Soon they could smell smoke. It was not wood smoke. It told them beyond doubt that it was the hay

burning. That sinister red glow in the sky was brighter than ever.

Plat threw up his hand and called a halt as they crested the slope that fell away to Pole Creek. Silhouetted against the red glow ahead, he was plainly visible. They saw him rise in his stirrups and listen intently, hand cupped to his ear.

"What is it?" Cantrell asked, pulling up alongside him.

"Listen!" Plat snapped. "Guns!"

There was no mistaking the sound. Cantrell caught it. So did the others. Sharp, flat, and ominous the distant cracking of rifles rolled up to them.

"Come on!" old Plat yelled. "We're takin' a hand in that!"

The years seemed to roll away from him. He was young again. The wild light of an eagle in his eyes, he led the treacherous descent down the slope to the creek.

VII.

Cutting across the mile-wide bend of the creek they crashed through the willows. Gallup's ranch lay spread out before them. Flames a hundred feet high were licking the sky. Three of the four haystacks were blazing. Even though they were still a quarter of a mile away, they could feel the heat of the raging fire. Night was turned into day.

For a distance of a hundred yards or more around the stacks the ice and snow had disappeared as though by magic. Rabbits and gophers had left their burrows and were darting over the ground, either fooled by the summerlike heat or fleeing for their lives.

The gunfire that had slacked off momentarily began to hammer again. It was far too bright on the big flat to locate the firing by the muzzle flashes. By the same token they were plainly visible to the men behind those guns. They realized it the next instant. Slugs began to whine dangerously close overhead. A Sash 8 rider slapped his arm, and his hand came away wet with blood.

"Plat, we can't stay here!" Cantrell yelled. "They'll pick us off like flies!"

"Git down into that irrigation ditch!" the old man ordered. "Keep down until we size things up!"

"They're shootin' at us from the barn!" Kendrick cried. "Don't you see them puffs of smoke? There's another bunch forted up in the house that's shootin' back! That'll be your men, Plat! We got to spread out and come up from the rear of the barn!"

"There ain't time for that!" Cantrell exclaimed. "There's a stack of hay out there that ain't burnin' yet! If we're goin' to save it, we've got to do somethin' in a hurry!"

"Cantrell's right!" Plat bawled. "When you hear me yell, send your ponies up the bank with a rush! We're chargin' across this flat as fast as hell will let us!"

The word went down the line. A moment later Plat's order to charge followed. Snow and ice flying, riders sent their ponies up the bank. Immediately they were under fire. Thieson's pony went down and rolled end over end. Cursing like a madman, Dutch fetched up ten yards away as the others swept on.

Plat was bearing off to the right, trying to get the blazing stacks between them and the firing from the barn. They made it without losing a man, but the heat made them swing wide before they could come up.

Expecting to be sprayed with lead, they were surprised not to have a shot fired at them. They drew up in front of the barn, from which they could see a board had been knocked out. The ground was littered with empty cartridges.

"Crawled through here and did a sneak, the dirty skunks!" Link Heaton growled. "There's their trail, plain as day!"

"Come on!" Kendrick urged. "We'll ride 'em into the ground!"

"That trail will be good an hour from now!" Plat told them. "We're goin' to save that hay! The wind is shiftin' right now! We'll git some wet tarps on it in a hurry or we're sunk!"

Men came running from the house. Cantrell recognized Gallup, his sons and three Sash 8 men. Before he could speak, old Plat was barking a question.

"What happened here, Rawson?" he demanded of his straw boss.

"Me and Chuck was in the kitchen, gittin' warm," the Sash 8 man explained. "Andrus and Shorty was outside, movin' around, when we heard a shot. Before I could git to the door Shorty came divin' in to tell me Andrus was down already and four or five gents was bangin' away tryin' to drop him, too. Guns were slammin' right and left. In jest a jiffy there wa'n't a window left in the house. One stack began to blaze, then another and—"

"Who in hell was it?" Plat cut him off.

"We don't know," Gallup answered him. "We never got a look at them. They got inside the barn and had the house covered, front and back. I tried to crawl through a window, but they changed my mind in a hurry."

"Gallup, we got to save that stack!" the old man jerked out. "Git out your tarps! And you, Shorty —where did you leave Andrus?"

"Last I saw of him he was between the fire and the crick," the Sash 8 man told him. "He was tryin' to crawl—"

"My God!" Cantrell groaned. "If he's in that scrub brush along the creek he's a goner! Look there!" He pointed to the remaining stack. It was beginning to blaze. Sparks had carried into the brush. The dry sage and greasewood were begin-

ning to roar, the flames traveling as fast as a man could run.

Knocking Kendrick out of the way, Lance swung his horse and leaped away. One arm shielding his face and the other holding his hat clamped over his pony's eyes, he drove through the blazing inferno. Once beyond the stacks, he headed for the burning brush, calling to Andrus. Suddenly, ahead of him, he saw a man try to rise on an elbow. Unable to make it, he fell back on the ground limply.

Cantrell flashed a glance over his shoulder at the advancing flames. He realized he'd never have time to pick up Andrus and carry him to safety. To get him out at all, he would have to catch him by the hand as he swept by and drag him into the open.

"Swede, stick up your hand!" he yelled.

Andrus understood. He flung up an arm. The next moment Cantrell had clutched his hand and was dragging him through the brush. It was cruel, brutal treatment to mete out to a desperately wounded man, but there was no other way.

Fortunately Cantrell had only a few yards to go. Short as the distance was, the strain on his arm was terrific. When he slid out of his saddle and bent over Andrus, he was surprised to discover that the man was still conscious.

"That was a close one, Swede," he muttered. "Where are you hurt?"

"My hip. Someding smash inside. Can't move noding from my vaist down—"

"You know who did it?"

"Sure! It was dat bunch dat runs vid Rock Haney. Ay tank Piegan Joe got me—"

Cantrell was conscious of a deep sense of relief. Thank God, Stony and the Kid were not in on this. The names Andrus mentioned were familiar to him. Rock Haney made a pretense of running sheep high up in the Two Medicines. It had long been suspected that his real business was swinging the wide loop.

"Haney and Piegan Joe?" Cantrell queried, not understanding why they should be interested in destroying the hay.

"Yah—and Ike Guffy and Ban Brack!"

"Brack?" The name was literally torn from Cantrell's lips.

"Yah. Ay see him ven he light de second stack."

Suddenly Cantrell understood. Brack's game was plain enough. With this hay destroyed, his own was worth whatever he wanted to ask for it. That the man was consorting with such characters as Rock Haney and his gang was not so surprising either, when he came to think of it. Brack sold and shipped livestock. Rumor had had it more than once that he was not too particular about certain details of ownership.

Plat and seven or eight others came pounding up. The rest were vainly trying to beat out the growing fire in the last stack. But the wind was beginning to blow in earnest by now and the hay was doomed.

"Plat, this man needs a doctor," Cantrell said before a question could be fired at him. "You better have Gallup hitch a team and get him started for town. If one or two of you give me a hand, we'll carry Swede up to the house."

"Wait a minute!" Plat exclaimed as three or four men stepped forward. "Cantrell, was Andrus able to tell you anythin'?"

"Yeah—"

"Who was it?"

"Brack!"

"Brack?" the men cried, a fresh grimness hardening their faces.

Andrus had to tell his story a second time. Wrath

swept away the last bonds of restraint in the men gathered round him.

"We know what to do about this!" Link Heaton snarled. "We'll permanently remove them gents from circulation!"

"And the sooner the better!" Perry English advised, his tone so fierce that Lance glanced at him in amazement. "I personally want to have the pleasure of putting a rope around Brack's neck! He's been robbing all of us for years!"

They carried Andrus to the house. Kendrick and those who had been fighting the fire had given up and were gathered outside Gallup's kitchen. Dutch was among them, his face skinned and bruised but otherwise none the worse for his fall.

Heaton rushed up to them with Andrus' story. It brought forth an instant demand for vengeance.

VIII.

A few moments later Plat and Cantrell stepped out of the kitchen. A Slash 8 man had been detailed to drive Andrus to town.

"We'll have a cup of coffee here before we pull away," Plat told them. "May be some time before we eat again."

"And we'll have to get organized," said Lance.

"Organized?" Kendrick scoffed. "There ain't no organizin' to do but pick up that trail and stay with it!"

Cantrell said no to that. "They certainly think they killed Andrus, and that we don't know who they are, but they'll be smart enough to break their trail. Follow it, and we'll get nowhere. If you'll listen to me, we'll head direct for Haney's camp. We'll find them there."

"That's about right," said Wheeler. "We got to be quick about this. Give 'em a chance to think things over and they'll run. There's one thing more —we've got to take Brack alive. We've got to have his hay!"

"We'll take it!" Kendrick whipped out.

Plat shook his head. "Twenty years ago that would have been all right, but we got law and order in this country now. Before we can take over that hay, we've got to have somethin' in writin' that a judge will put his O. K. on."

It was only common sense, but this crowd was in no mood to listen to reason. Determined to wreak a bitter vengeance for the wrongs they had suffered, they could only regard Plat's words as a check. Yet, in the end, they agreed; and of them all, only Cantrell remarked to himself how strange it was that a man whom they had hated so long could so easily have his way with them.

On leaving Gallup's place they began to climb immediately, riding in double columns where the going would permit, and often moving at no faster than a walk. These hill trails were seldom used in winter, and snow blocked their way more than once.

Because he knew these high places better than most, Kendrick rode in the lead. It was close to dawn when he called a halt and told them they were within half a mile of Rock Haney's camp.

"We'll tip our hand for sure if the whole bunch of us try to move up," said Plat. "Two or three go ahead." He indicated Cantrell, Buxton, and Kendrick. "If they're there, send word back to us, and then sit tight until day breaks."

The old sheep camp stood in the center of a little mountain meadow. The three men moved in on it until they were within less than two hundred yards of the door. No light showed and no sound came from the low stone house.

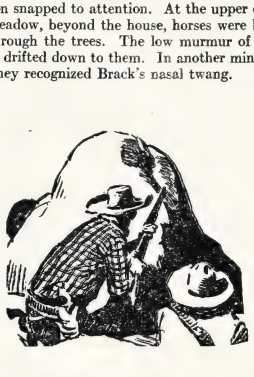
"What do you think?" Kendrick asked after they had watched it for ten minutes.

"No one there," declared Buxton. "They'd have cooked coffee or somethin' before turnin' in. Coffee means a fire and we'd be bound to catch a whiff of smoke."

Kendrick was for making certain.

"We better stick where we are awhile longer," Lance advised. "If anyone opens up on us, we've got good cover here. Be daylight in another fifteen minutes."

They had just settled themselves to wait when Buxton snapped to attention. At the upper end of the meadow, beyond the house, horses were breaking through the trees. The low murmur of men's voices drifted down to them. In another minute or two they recognized Brack's nasal twang.



In the thinning dawn mist they saw Brack, Guffy, Piegan Joe, the breed, and Haney put their ponies in the shed and go into the house. A few moments later they had a fire going.

"I'll go back," Cantrell offered. "Be sure you don't bring on a fight till we're here."

His message was quickly delivered.

"All right," Plat announced. "We'll leave a man or two with the horses and close in. If anyone figures he's goin' to start throwin' lead as soon as he gits in sight of the place, he better stay behind. No need of any man gittin' a bullet in him if we use our heads."

When they had joined Buxton and Kendrick, the old man studied the sheep camp carefully.

"It's a stout place," he declared. "Rush that house, and we'll lose a lot of men. Best thing we can do is to surround it and trick 'em out into the open."

"How can you do it, Plat?" Kendrick asked.

"Well, suppose you lead one party around to the east. Cantrell, you take another bunch around the other way. Post your men until you've made a circle. When you're ready, let me know. I'll call on 'em to come out. Nothin' will come of that, of course. We'll begin smokin' them then. It may

take all mornin'. In the meantime, I don't want no shootin' from above the house. I want Brack to think that way is open. Sooner or later his bunch will make a rush for their ponies. When they do, we'll grab 'em."

The moment the circle was complete, Plat raised his voice in a ringing demand for Brack and his men to give themselves up. As he expected, there was no answer.

"All right, boys!" he cried. "Let 'em have it!"

Rifles began to buck right and left. That first withering blast left the windows empty of glass. Slugs pinged wickedly off the stone face of the house. From within came a determined answering fire. Powder fumes lay like a blanket on the early-morning air, and the thunder of the shooting rolled away into the far corridors of these hills.

"Don't waste too many cartridges!" Plat warned. "Just keep snipin' at 'em so they'll know we're here!"

With Brack's crowd returning shot for shot, the fight went on. When the morning was half gone, Dutch Thieson could stand it no longer. Wheeler had been careful to post the hotheaded rancher close to himself, where he could keep an eye on him.

"I'm crawling up on 'em!" Thieson announced defiantly. "We be here all winter if we blay it dis way!"

Before Plat could stop him, Dutch leaped out from behind the rock where he had been stretched. He hadn't taken three steps before a slug struck his rifle and knocked it out of his hands. Throwing himself to the ground, he crept back to safety and had no more to say.

Noontime came without bringing the break Plat had expected. "They're goin' to take a lot of persuadin'," he told Buxton. "You're a dead shot. Can't you knock the hinges off that door?"

Buxton set himself to the task with a will. His magazine was empty before the door began to sag. Finally a lucky shot split the lower hinge, and the door tumbled down.

"Now pour it into 'em!" Plat roared.

Inside the house the crashing door and the murderous fire being directed through the opening had the desired effect. With Haney leading the way, the four men made a dash for the barn.

Wheeler was quick to note that his fire was not being returned. "They're runnin'!" he cried. "Come on! Keep the house between us and the barn! We'll cut 'em off!"

Cantrell and Kendrick were on the job. With two or three others, they crossed the meadow on the dead run. Before the men in the barn could toss their saddles on their broncs, they were surrounded, trapped. Haney threw up his gun and fired at Plat. The shot went wild. Before he could get in a second shot he was knocked cold as Cantrell's long-barreled .45 came crashing down on his skull.

Brack attempted a blustering show of innocence, but Plat Wheeler shut him up in a hurry.

"We'll make this short and sweet, Brack. You deserve hangin'—you and your friends! There's only one thing will keep us from it! I'll write out a bill of sale for your hay. Sign it, and we'll give the four of you a chance to git out of this country! And I mean git out and stay out!"

"You'll never get my hay—" Brack started to protest.

"Is that final?" Plat demanded. With Kendrick and a dozen others swarming in on him, Brack changed his mind in a hurry.

"Write it out!" he whined. "I'll sign it! I'll sign it!"

Wheeler wrote out a bill of sale on the back of an old letter. His hand shaking so violently he dropped the pencil once, Brack signed his name.

"You witness his signature, Cantrell," Plat ordered. That done, he told Brack to climb aboard his horse. "The four of you git goin' now. Don't waste no time about it, and if you ever show your faces in this country again, we'll string you up on sight, and no questions asked! Git!"

"Aw, they're gittin' off too easy!" Reb Smiley protested as the four men hurried up the trail. "I'd jest like to put my mark on Brack once!"

"No, Reb, I made a deal with him," Plat said firmly. "I keep my word even when I give it to a rat."

A man brought up the Sash 8 horses a few minutes later. Plat climbed into his saddle. "I'll send word to the Bonta boys and Decker that you're to have that hay you want," he said. "I'll go direct to town myself and take care of the legal end of things. Some of you look ready to drop, but you've still got your real work to do."

Buxton was waiting for Plat's nod. Getting it, the Sash 8 began to move away in a body. Cantrell turned to Perry and Kendrick.

"We can't let him go like that," he said. "Not after the way he's come through!" Not a man who heard failed to agree. "Plat!" Cantrell called out. "There'll be a regular meetin' of the association at the hall Monday night! "We . . . we'll be lookin' for you!"

The old man did not turn to glance at them. There was something in his eyes he did not want them to see. He had been waiting a long while for this moment. "I'll make it a point to be there!" he answered, gruffness covering the break in his voice.

THE END.

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CONTRABANDO

By L. L. Foreman

Preacher Devlin could deliver a six-gun sermon when the need arose, but that hard-bitten ghost-town congregation needed plenty of hot-lead persuasion before it started dropping stolen dobe dollars into his collection box!

Devlin looked up as he descended and saw a head jerking back.

I.

HERE on the sunken flats, heat beat against the eyeballs and hammered at the brain, while the sun drew its maddeningly slow curve across the brilliant sky. Heat waves danced giddily in the vast silence, torturing the wild forlorn outlines of this desert of the Harque Hala, where savage beauty held out against the desolation of rainless days and blasting hot winds.

For over the sharp skyline on four sides rose the thrusting peaks of the Big Horns, the White Tanks, Eagle Eye and the Vulture Mountains, looking like crinkled brown paper with the sun gilding the edges. To the skyline ran the long leagues of tawny sand, splashed by the dead black areas of broken malpais, the arid soil grudgingly granting a scanty life only to the blue-green saltweed and dusty, scattered greasewood.

Hard country, with a grim and unfriendly air of desiring to be let alone and avoided. But Aguila lay to the northwest. The word was out that a new strike had been made there, putting free-flowing money and bursting life into that mining town. For that, for swift living and a fling at quick gains, the rider of the big black had been casually ready and willing to cross the Harque Hala.

Tall, large-boned, he filled the saddle, and the stirrup straps were let out to the last notch to fit his long legs. Incongruous against the emptiness, yet, somehow, in keeping with the saturnine gravity of his dark and strong-lined face, his garb hinted of austere ways and ministerial pursuits. His coat, long and black, hung somberly to the tops of his high riding boots of plain black leather. The flat-crowned hat, with its broad brim, suggested both a Quakerish and rakish past. Under its shade and against his brown skin, the gray of his deep-set eyes shone with the steady coldness of tarnished silver, matching the hardness of a mouth that bespoke predatory instincts and a satanic turn of humor.

Now the rider of the black was halted under the sun's full blaze, gazing off toward the north, where the wind-

drifted sand had banked up raggedly against a broken line of malpais. His considering regard lasted until one of the shapeless dots moved again. The heat waves alone did not account for such movement.

Idle curiosity was not one of this man's traits, but he reined the big black around and pointed its walk toward the line of malpais. Whatever it was over there, he was not going to overheat his horse getting to it. Nor did he hasten the gait when he made out the dot to be a man. He put more value on his mount than he did on the life or well-being of any stranger.

The man crouched in the scant shade of the malpais, both hands clasped over his stomach. A canteen and a new rifle lay beside him. He turned up an agonized face, his pain too great for him to show any wonder at sight of the black horse and its rider. His agate eyes were clouded, but they still held a remnant of reckless philosophy that backed up the promise of his reddish, tousled hair. Youth and toughness helped him bring up a twitching grimace meant for a grin.

"I guess," he gasped, "I'm a pretty sick man."

The somber rider nodded, his eyes not losing their chill. "Dyin', mebbe," he remarked. His voice was deep and harsh.

He swung out of the saddle, and on the ground he loomed like a giant, straight-backed, his great chest and breadth of shoulders telling of crushing strength. Yet he moved softly, quietly, and the fingers of his finely turned hands were long and supple.

"What you been eatin'?" he queried, and loosened the black's cinch.

"Not much of anything, last two days." The answer came in painful jerks. "I got lost. Started out from Bolada about a week ago. Missed Wickenburg, and my horse gave in and died. Found a kind of pool a way back. Water tasted queer, but I filled my canteen. My stomach's tied in a knot, feels like. Maybe it was that water."

The big man poured from the canteen into his cupped palm, and tasted. He spat, and let the canteen gurgle its contents into the sand.

"You got no more sense than to drink from an alum spring?" he demanded.

"Alum? I didn't know." The sick man started to sit up, then bent over. "I'm new to this hell's back yard of a country. Can you do anything for me, or do I just sit here and die?"

The big man took bleak survey of him. "You'll sure die if you don't get sweet water in you soon," he growled shortly, and unstrapped his own half-moon canteen from behind the cantle. "Here, fill up on this. You'll need plenty to wash out that alum, so keep drinkin'. What name d'you go by?"

"Mine's McLean. Michael McLean. You?"

"Devlin."

"Thanks for the water, Devlin."

"Hm-m-m." Devlin took the saddle off the black, and sat in the meager shade, an unlighted Mexican cigarro between his teeth and a look of brooding speculation in his cold eyes. It was going to take all day and all the water to untie that alum-knotted stomach.

Water. There might be a spring somewhere up in the Vultures, far over there toward the west. It was a gamble and a long one, but the best chance at hand. The water in that half-moon canteen had been his measured bet against the Harque Hala—and here was this McLean hombre swallowing it down, gulp by gulp. He mentally damned all stray pilgrims fools enough to tackle the Arizona deserts without guides and a pack train. Tonight, as soon as the sun set, the long, dry trek to the Vultures would have to begin, whether McLean was fit to travel or not. Either that, or tomorrow face a day of parching heat without a drink.

The black's hoofs sluff-sluffed through the fine, powdery sand, sending up little spurts of dust. Devlin kept pace with his long stride, sinking ankle-deep at every step. A full and luminous moon poured its pale light over the desert, and coated the hovering peaks of the Vultures ahead with a transparent haze.

Michael McLean stirred in the saddle and drew the black to a halt. "You ride a spell, Devlin," he said, and dismounted. "I can walk."

Devlin shrugged. "Suit yourself. We'll both walk an' give the horse a chance. He hasn't had a drink since noon."

They tramped on in silence, the world empty around them, until McLean spoke again. "It's sort of funny that we should be making for the Vulture Mountains."

Devlin's silver-gray eyes glimmered at him briefly across the horse. "Glad you see it that way. My tastes run a little different."

"Coincidence, I mean," McLean corrected himself with a grin. "D'you happen to know anything about Clear Day?"

"Yeah," Devlin said solemnly. He'd never thought of alum as an intoxicant, but this seemed to be a case of it. "We get lots o' that kind in this country. One clear day after another."

"You win." McLean grinned again. "But this Clear Day I'm speaking of is a place, or something, up in the Vultures. It's what I came to search for. If I find it, I find a fortune!"

Once more Devlin turned his head and regarded him, this time with the half-amused contempt of a hard materialist for a gullible idealist.

"One o' those, huh? Ever try findin' the Lost Dutchman Mine, or the Gunsight, or Morgan's buried treasure?"

"You forgot to mention the lost treasure of the Aztecs, Drake's cache, and the sunken Spanish galleons," McLean reminded him dryly. "I took a

shot at all those, while knocking around down in the South and Central Americas. But the only money I made down there was as a *soldado de fortuna* and military adviser to some rebel generals who finally got shot. They paid me thousands, but the money turned out to be counterfeit when I tried to spend it, and I had to break jail. This thing is different, though; I've got proof."

"Proof o' what?"

"Proof that there's a fortune in Mexican silver—big, hard dobe dollars, smuggled *contrabando* silver—up in the Vultures! It's buried somewhere on the south side of one of the peaks, near a wide ledge where an old mining town used to be. And I know which peak it is, and the name of that forgotten old ghost town! I guess you saved my life, Devlin, and I'm grateful. I'm willing to let you in on this at even shares."

"*Muchas gracias,*" murmured Devlin dryly. "It's a good thing you pilgrims come in an' show us natives where to look, or we'd all die poor. *Contrabando* silver, huh? It used to be quite a business, raidin' those big *contrabandista* mule trains that slipped up over the border. The Mexicans could sell their dobe dollars at bullion prices to the right party, an' go back with good American gold, beating the high tariff both ways. But the raiders gen'rally spent that *contrabanda* silver when they got it. They didn't bury their plunder on some peak, an' then go ridin' off an' forget about it. At least, that wasn't *my* habit!"

"The raiders didn't spend any of this particular loot," McLean stated. "A black-sheep uncle of mine was among 'em. I know the whole story."

"So?" Devlin's eyes grew thoughtful. "Well, that brings it closer to home. What's the story?"

"I've got it all here." McLean touched a shirt pocket. "Part of a letter written by this uncle of mine to my father. He was my father's youngest brother. He went under the name of Sandy Mac after he came West, and I guess he lived a pretty wild life while he lasted. Dad was a Louisiana judge for thirty years, and he never did approve of Sandy Mac. Nor of me, either. Claimed there was too much Sandy Mac in my blood. He died while I was in South America, and I found this letter among his papers when I came home."

"What about the silver?"

"I'm coming to that. I can't read the letter in this moonlight, but I pretty near know it by heart. It seems Sandy Mac threw in with a wild bunch known as Russian Jack's Raiders. They operated along the border, holding up Mexican smugglers. Sandy Mac says they did more to put down smuggling than all the law officers in the country. They finally made a rich haul when they captured a string of mules loaded with dobe dollars, after chasing off the Mexican party. Then they began arguing over the sharing of the plunder."

"It happens sometimes," put in Devlin reminiscently.

McLean nodded. "They split into two factions. Sandy Mac claimed that Russian Jack was trying to hog most of the silver, and some of the gang backed him up. When the smoke cleared, only Sandy Mac and two other men were left standing. Russian Jack's horse had bolted with him. The rest were down. So Sandy Mac and the other two mutineers, Navaho Jones and Billy Red, started north with the mule train. They had a fortune in *contrabando* silver!"

Devlin glanced at him, and saw the shine in his eyes. This McLean pilgrim had the wild blood of his black-sheep uncle in him, all right, and he was no tenderfoot in the ways of violence. He was a penniless young adventurer, seasoned to danger and careless death, with the fortune fever running hot in him.

"But they knew Russian Jack was still alive," McLean went on. "This Russian Jack was a fighting fool. And those Mexican smugglers might come tracking after 'em, too. They talked it over while they whipped the mules north. Navaho Jones proposed they hide the *contrabando* up in the Vultures, and come back later for it. He said he knew a good place up Skeleton Peak, where a mining town had gone bad and was deserted. The town was called Bronco City, named after a big, overhanging rock known as Bronco Rock, which looked like a bucking horse. D'you know the place, Devlin?"

"Heard of it," nodded Devlin. "Didn't know exactly where that old ghost town was located, though. So they hid the loot there?"

"No, it seems they didn't," replied McLean. "According to Sandy Mac's letter, the town's built on a wide ledge up the side of a peak, with an old wagon road leading up to it from the south side. As they reached the ledge, Navaho Jones swore and said the place gave him the shivers. He'd lived with Indians so much, he had all their superstitions. He prowled through the empty town, looking around, and finally said, 'Hell, I don't like this place. Let's bury the damned silver in Clear Day. I want to get out of here.' So that's what they did, I guess."

"Hm-m-m," grunted Devlin. "Don't you know, for sure?"

McLean shook his head. "No. The next page of the letter is missing. My father must have burned that page. He was a mighty strict man, and considered any money that wasn't honestly earned cursed. He died poor, but proud. The rest of the letter he kept, probably out of remembrance for his brother. That missing page makes a bad gap. There isn't much clue in the rest. Want to hear the end of it?"

Devlin shrugged. "Might's well. It passes the time." The thoughtful gleam had deepened in his eyes.

"It was night when they came back down the peak with the unloaded mules," McLean went on. "They got almost down to the desert, and then Russian Jack cut loose at them in the dark. He must have trailed them. Navaho Jones dropped dead at the first shot. Billy Red fell next, before he could get his gun going. The mules bolted, and Sandy Mac's horse threw him. He fired from the ground, heard a grunt, and got up. But Russian Jack wasn't through. He gave his yell, cut loose again, and his bullet got Sandy Mac in the chest.

"Sandy Mac started crawling. He was still crawling when some Indians picked him up in the desert next morning. He knew he was dying, so he wrote the whole thing down and traded the Indians his gun for their promise to send the letter to my father. Used a pencil and some pages from a notebook. That silver wouldn't ever do him any good, he said, but he wanted somebody to have it, anyway. Urged my father to come and get it, and pointed out that it was *contrabando*, taken from crooked Mexicans just as law officers would have had the right to take it, if they'd caught the smugglers bringing it in.

"His last words were a warning to anybody coming for that silver to watch out for Russian Jack. This Russian Jack never gave up anything he ever started, and he was a bad man to meet. When he went into a fight, he'd always let out a yell that sounded like six wolves howling at once—his old Cossack war cry. He could kill a man with a punch, and hard cash meant more to him than life, whiskey or the devil."

"Yeah, I've heard of Russian Jack, too," Devlin nodded. "He disappeared years ago. Probably died, somewhere. He had an American-born son livin' near Tucson. As I recall, the son got killed soon after he married a rancher's daughter, an' his widow died three or four years later."

He gazed reflectively ahead at the Vulture, clearly outlined with nearness. "Skeleton Peak, huh? That's it, yonder. The high, skinny one. If there's a ghost town up there, they must've had a spring close by for their water. And if there's anything left o' that old wagon road on the south side, we can find it. Yeah, I reckon this Bronco City might be as good a place to make for as any. Let me have that letter, McLean. I want to read it when it gets light."

The full moon gave the hour as after midnight when they angled across the southern slope of Skeleton Peak. Here the sand gave way to the upthrusting granite, and on this side, the peak was less sheer. Devlin, his eyes sharply roving, swung a pointing arm farther up the slope, where low-growing cedar bush almost filled a shallow wash.

"There's the road, I reckon."

The faint ruts still marked a bank of the wash, following its winding course up the peak. On the flats, the desert sand had sifted over and buried this forgotten wagon road that once had borne its heavy burdens of ore and supplies over the long grind between Bronco City and Wickenburg, but the higher ground still held remnants of the imprint.

Above, far up the slope, jutted the wide ledge of the old mining site. Atop of it, rose the great boulder of Bronco Rock, a protruding lump that broke the sheer wall of the higher cliff. Gradually, its lines could be made out to form what looked like a plunging horse, head slung low, huge neck and back arched in a mad, bucking heap. Devlin glanced at McLean, who was staring up at the thing, and grinned faintly.

"Been there a million years," he remarked. "I don't figure he'll choose this night to finish his jump. Let's get on up an' pay him a visit."

He started on up the dim ruts of the road, leading the black, and McLean followed. The stunted cedar and fallen rock covered it in places, but another trail that followed the course of the wash caught Devlin's searching attention. It seemed to cut in from a higher level, and kept to the hard rock. He paused, trying to decide about it. In the moonlight it was hard to tell the age of the beaten trail. He bent over, peering down, and blinked once when he saw plainly the deep scar of a mammoth hoof in the solid rock.

From the moon-made shadows of a cedar clump, close at hand, a sudden voice barked a brittle command. "Throw up your hands!"

II.

Devlin's reaction was prompt and swift. As he wheeled and ducked low, his right hand flicked under the ministerial coat and out again with a long-barreled gun. A shot spurted its thudding roar at him, then he was in the cedar brush, slipping noiselessly through the shadows while McLean flopped to the ground with his rifle.

He made no sound when, eeling his black-garbed body through the brush, he sighted the dark blob of his quarry. Nor did he fire, though not from charity. A dead man could tell him nothing, and there were things here he wanted to know. He crept on, stalking the dark figure that kept turning its head this way and that, for a sight of him. His exploring finger picked up a stone, and he pitched it. The crouched figure whirled at the stone's rattle, hesitated an instant, and squirmed fast around, evidently recognizing the sound as a trick, though realizing it too late.

Devlin made his long, low leap. His gun barrel slashed through the branches, and landed on something more solid. He rose, brushing off his clothes, and when McLean found him, he was carefully trimming his mashed cigarro.

McLean looked down at the silent form sprawled under the stunted cedar. "Is he dead?"

Devlin shook his head and gave a final finishing lick to the cigarro. "Not unless his skull's thinner than most. Drag him out into the moonlight, an' let's have a look at him."

In the moonlight they took survey of their captive, a hard-faced, knotty little man, with a bulldog chin and stiff hair cut short. Thin lips, compressed, gave the square face a look of stubborn tenacity.

"A lawman, if I'm any judge," commented Devlin, and pulled open the shirt.

He examined the small gold badge pinned on the inside of the shirt, and nodded. "Now what's a special deputy marshal doin' in this forsaken—Hm-m-m, he's wakin' up. Tough little hombre. Seems like I've seen him before."

"Likely enough." The answer came raspingly from the lawman. He sat up. His frosty blue eyes, round and unwinking, bored at Devlin. "I've seen you, too—Preacher Devlin!" He searched for his hat, and clapped it on without bothering to rub his bruised head.

A murmur came from McLean. "Preacher Devlin? Say, I've heard of you." He stared at Devlin, his expression reflecting the knowledge that came with the name: Preacher Devlin, gun fighter, gambler, dark bird of prey, with a sinister reputation for wrecking laws and men when they got in the way of his purpose.

"You heard nothin' good!" snapped the lawman, and got up. "Devlin, if I'd known it was you, I'd 've cut loose sooner!"

A gentle smile came to Devlin's lean and saturnine face. "You can pick up your gun an' try again," he suggested softly.

The lawman dipped his eyes at the gun master's long-fingered hands, hanging empty, and shook his head. "I only bet when I got a chance. I'm Arno Roone."

"So?" Devlin's cold smile remained. "Cash-bounty Roone, huh? I remember now. Saw you in Tombstone, when you brought in three men for their bounty. They were dead men, naturally. They're most always dead when Cash-bounty Roone brings 'em in."

Arno Roone twitched a shoulder, his unwinking eyes hard and callous. "They're easier to handle that way, an' worth just as much. Bounty-huntin' is my business. Ever'body knows that. I hunt 'em for their bounty, nothin' else."

"Would you be huntin' me for mine, this time?"

"No." Roone gave his answer promptly. "I didn't expect to run into you. Wasn't lookin' for you here."

"Then what're you lookin' for?"

"That's my business. What're *you* lookin' for?"

"Water," drawled Devlin. "You been up on the peak yet? No? Well, now's a good time, an' you'll have company. You trot ahead, an' we'll come—"

Devlin suddenly half turned and stood very still. The blue sheen of a gun winked in his hand. "Somebody behind that rock yonder," he murmured. "Come out, you! Holdin' out on me, Roone? Got friends with you?"

"Only Vaquiu, my Navaho guide," said Roone. "He's bad scared. Been that way since we got here, couple hours ago. Them Navahos call this place *doyashon*, meanin' bad or haunted, far's I make out. Pah! Crazy notions they do get."

From behind the rock rose the Indian, his bare hands in the air and the shine of fear in his black eyes. Reluctantly, he came forward, darting glances up the peak. Tall, slim, his red sash band around his head and his long hair tied in his tribal knot, he didn't look like a coward, but the deep terror in him was visible.

He stepped gingerly across the trail, and gestured back at it. *"Kleea-veitso-betay!"* he muttered, and shivered.

"'Footprints of the Horse God,'" Devlin translated. "Yeah, I saw 'em, Vaquiu. But I'd have to see that stone horse come clumpin' down before I'd believe he made 'em!"

"Sure," Roone snorted. "There's an explanation for ever'thin', even for that singin' I heard."

"Singing?" McLean asked.

"Uh-huh. Sounded like a girl singin' up there. Prob'ly the wind." Roone dismissed it contemptuously. "I've heard o' ghosts, but I don't ever expect to see—"

He stopped short. His round eyes slowly lifted to stare up the peak, and his look was that of a man seeing a lie proved by fact. Devlin gazed up and cocked one dark eyebrow, while McLean drew in his breath with a sharp sound.

Up there, on the edge of the wide ledge and directly underneath the galloping forefeet of Bronco Rock, a light had begun to flicker. It grew brighter, a bluish fire that cast weirdly hued light dancing up the sides of the great stone horse.

A mumbling groan came from Vaquiu, and disjointed words. *"Yeitso . . . no vahtay . . .* the fire of *Dogi-srlaani!"*

Devlin flung the Indian a quick glance. *"Dogi-srlaani!* The Bearded Man. What fool talk is that?"

Vaquiu stood rigid, eyes bulging at the ledge. The blue fire leaped higher, illuminating the upper cliff and casting on it the distorted shadow of Bronco Rock. A fantastic figure moved in the glare of it, bent over and tending the fire. It looked like the raggedly garbed skeleton of a giant. A long mane of white hair hung from its head, and a tangled, matted beard covered most of the face and chest. Its rags flapped as it moved about the

fire, poking it and arranging the burning faggots.

"Look!" whispered McLean. "He pokes it with his hand. He's picked one up by the burning end and shoved it farther into the fire! It doesn't burn him!"

Vaquiu gave a moaning howl. *"Dogi-srlaani!"* His moccasins pattered, and he was gone.

Roone took one step after the Indian, paused, and swore deep in his throat. Hoofs struck fast on rock, and from a cedar thicket burst a running horse, Vaquiu bent low over its neck. The hoofs dug in sand and the muffled beat of them died quickly away into the desert. The frightened Navaho had fled this *dovashon* place of blue fire, white-bearded ghost, and mammoth tracks of Bronco Rock.

The *Dogi-srlaani* raised his wild head at the sound below, and stood back from the fire, gazing out over the moon-misted expanse of desert. He threw up a half-naked arm in a beckoning gesture, dropped it, and bent again over the fire. The squeal of a horse floated back faintly from the desert, and brooding silence closed in after it.

Devlin brought his gaze down from the ledge. "Maybe the Big Bronc'll come traipsin' down next," he observed dryly, "but I don't feel like waitin' for that. Let's prowl on up. Where's your horse, Roone?"

"Over in that thicket." Roone's voice sounded a little strained.

"I'll leave mine there with him," said Devlin, and led the black off. "We don't want noise." He chose a sandy course to the thicket, and left the black tethered.

McLean and Roone were waiting when he returned. As they advanced up the old wagon road, McLean still kept his eyes fixed on the fire above, until he tripped on a rock.

"Quiet!" growled Devlin. "That ghost's got ears."

"Pointed ears, maybe, an' a forked tail," put in Roone. He had evidently regained his hard-headed composure, and all his contempt for the supernatural had returned. But he stepped lightly. He had picked up his gun, and he kept it in his hand. "I reckon I'll take a shot at Whiskers when I get up there," he added, "an' see what we got."

Devlin threw him a black look. "I reckon you won't. No bounty on ghosts, far's I know."

They trod the road up its winding course, losing sight of the fire until they came out abruptly on the ledge. It was wider than it appeared from below. Before them spread the forgotten town of Bronco City, faintly lighted by the blue fire at the far end of the rubble-strewn street.

Caved-in buildings lined the street, the supports rotted with age. Here and there a sagging false front teetered grotesquely out from the broken array of gaunt walls, and over the time-made wreckage jutted the great plunging horse of Bronco Rock, silent and forbidding in its mad, still leap, its gigantic body thrusting out from the higher cliff-side of Skeleton Peak.

The oppressive sense of moldering things hung heavily over the place. Here, where life had once been fast and pungent, death and the slow rot of age ruled. The empty corpse of saloons and dance halls listed wearily at angles of sad finality, waiting to fall and become dust, and from one a long-surviving sign drooped dismally by a single hook, proclaiming in carved letters that this was the "Morning Glory."

McLean spoke in a whisper, gripped by the hushed desolation. "I don't blame Navaho Jones for not liking this spot! I'd sooner live in a graveyard than—"

Devlin's hard fingers dug into his arm, silencing him. The gun master nodded mutely along the street, his narrowed eyes cogitative.

Down the street came a slim white figure, made luminous and ethereal by the moonlight. Long hair of deep gold, loosely bound, flowed over the shoulders and down the white arms. Steadily, soundlessly, it advanced, the blue fire behind it forming a radiant halo to silhouette the slender outline of the walking girl. She walked with the step of a lithe young Indian, light and springy, her body proudly erect and her head high.

It seemed as if she would come upon the three watching men where they stood regarding her, but she turned aside and vanished into a small cabin built under Bronco Rock.

Roone expelled a long breath. "Devlin, what the devil d'you make o' that?" he whispered tensely.

Devlin spat out a flake of tobacco, and went on chewing his cigarro, his eyes on the small cabin. "We might call on her an' ask," he suggested, and led the way.

McLean caught him by the arm. "No rough play, Devlin!" he said tightly. "I've never taken trouble to a woman yet, and I don't intend to begin tonight!" His stare was level, challenging, and Devil could read his mind.

He'd fight and die, this young Louisiana soldier of fortune, to protect a girl or the ghost of a girl. He'd knocked around in hard places, but the simple and unbreakable chivalry of the Deep South still held strong in him. A queer mixture, this wandering adventurer, of cool-headed Scotch practicality and hot Southern idealism. He hadn't been greatly shocked to find he'd teamed up with the most notorious lobo in Arizona, in a hunt for a fortune in *contrabando* silver, but now the presence of a girl in this ghost town brought a lot of morals to the surface.

"It's a pretty good rule to be sure o' the ground ahead, before you charge into it," said Devlin. "I said we'd call on her. I said nothin' else. Don't let any wild stories you might've heard about me influence your judgment. It might not be the best

way to get along with me."

He strode on, soft-footed, toward the cabin which, he noted, seemed stoutly built and in pretty good condition on the outside. Down at the far end of the street, the *Dogi-srlaani* still tended his blue fire, back turned to the town. The ragged, white-haired giant squatted on his heels, keeping his fire blazing bright, and often pausing to lift his tangled head as if listening to the desert below.

Quietly Devlin entered the street, McLean at his side and Roone following with his gun in hand. Devlin turned once, to find Roone raising his gun, eyes on the squatting figure of the *Dogi-srlaani*. He sent the lawman a stare of cold warning, and Roone lowered the gun with a shrug. To shoot fast and readily was the nature of the man, and it was on his record that he brooked no interference, but he had wisdom, too, and a sullen respect for a faster man.

They reached the cabin's front. The door stood ajar, and Devlin crept up to it. With ironic humor in mind, a mocking sop to McLean's code of polite behavior toward women, he raised his closed hand to rap on the door before entering. But first he glanced inside the cabin.

He didn't knock. He stepped inside and looked about him. Bare walls, bare dirt floor. No furniture, no windows. He chewed a little harder on his unlighted Mexican cigarro.

Except for his own presence, the single-room cabin was as completely empty as his money belt.

III.

McLean shoved back his hat and ran fingers through his reddish hair. "It's all crazy!" he muttered. "Footprints of that stone horse over us, blue fire, *Dogi-srlaani!* And now a gold-headed girl who disappears in an empty cabin! If I were alone, I'd say it was that alum I drank, giving me nightmares, hallucinations, and aberrations of the—What's that?"

Shattering the night's silence, a wild, screaming howl rang out. It lasted while the echoes rolled back from up the peak, till it seemed that the cliff trembled and reverberated with the ghastly sound. The three men jerked alert, hair roots tingling as if in automatic response to the cry of a wolf. The eerie howl stopped short on its highest note, and the shallow echoes gave it back. Then the heavy hush crept in again.

McLean, nearest the door, leaped outside. When Devlin got there, he saw the *Dogi-srlaani* still at the brink of the ledge beside his fire, head thrown back like a baying hound.

"The old Cossack war cry!" McLean whispered. "The fighting yell of Russian Jack! Damn, it can't be! It's his ghost!"

Roone sliced upward with his ready gun. "Blast him, we'll soon find out if he's a ghost or not!" he snarled. The wild howl had shaken even his concrete nerves and put him on edge.

Devlin knocked up the gun with a sweep of his arm. "I'll ram that thing down your damn throat, you go shootin' it off 'round me!" he promised grimly, and nodded curtly to McLean. "If you look anythin' like that Sandy Mac uncle o' yours, that feller will know it an' show sign. That is, if he's Russian Jack. Go an' hail him, but watch out he don't clout you with a Siberian samovar or somethin'!"

They moved through the street, Roone angrily muttering and fingering his gun. McLean went ahead. He was ten yards from the fire when he sent out his low call.

"Hello, there! Are you Russian Jack?"

The *Dogi-srlaani* whirled. For an instant he crouched, regarding McLean with savage intentness. Under the shaggy tangle of his white hair, his sunken black eyes took on a fierce glare of triumph. The fingers of one hand worked, opening and closing, and the great veins of his long arms stood out.

"Sandy Mac!" His voice came in a throaty growl, hoarse and resonant. The hooked beak of a nose flared out at the nostrils, and his wild glare brightened to madness. "Ah, Sandy Mac, I've waited so long for you to come! So long to wait. But I knew you would come back some day for the silver! Where did you hide it, Sandy Mac? Where? Where?"

His last demand was a shout. He sprang at McLean, his veined arms outstretched to grapple and smash and tear. McLean dodged fast, but not fast enough to elude the lunge of the ancient outlaw. Young and tough as he was, he went down as if hit by a battering-ram, twisting and struggling to escape the clutch of the throat-reaching fingers.

Devlin jumped and grabbed hold of the matted white mane. His broad shoulders bunched, and he hauled hard, swinging the madman clear of his victim and slamming him face down, on the ground. It took all his powerful strength to hold him there, heaving and bucking, until suddenly Russian Jack relaxed and stretched out quietly under the weight of the gun fighter.

"Whew!" McLean rose to his feet. "That was close. I never knew I looked so much like Sandy Mac."

Devlin drew Russian Jack's arms behind him, and Roone handed him his bandanna. The captive was submissive, stoical in defeat. Devlin paused before tying the arms, and gazed at the right one.

"Here's the reason he doesn't burn his hand when he pokes the fire," he drawled to McLean. "His right hand's gone. He wears an iron hook."

"Sandy Mac's work." The remark came coolly from the captive. He twisted around and looked up at them, and now a mocking self-possession had

replaced his madness. "He shot my hand to pieces. I've long wondered what my bullet did to him."

"It killed him," said McLean. "He died next day in the desert."

A twisted smile touched the gaunt face. "And to think that I waited and watched so long for him to come back." A shred of half-forgotten culture shaded his voice and manner. He fixed his sunken eyes on McLean. "But you are kin to him, I see. Could I ever forget his cursed face and red hair? For a moment, I forgot, when I saw you, that he would have changed with age, just as I have changed. I think I know what has brought you here. You came for the silver!"

"Go ahead an' tie him up, Devlin," put in Roone. His stare had grown calculating. "I don't sabe this talk o' silver, but I might've known you came here for somethin' more than water! Tie him up, or I'll do it. He's my prisoner!"

"Yours?" Devlin stood up and eyed the bounty hunter. "Feller, you're lucky to be alive. Don't push your luck too far!"

"He's my prisoner," Roone repeated doggedly. "I'm on the trail o' the Pecos Wild gang, an' he's one of 'em! They use this country, an' I know it. That's why I'm here. Pecos Wild an' his bunch are in cahoots with a Mex outfit. They operate up around the Chino Valley country, liftin' horses wholesale. The Mex crowd operates south o' the border. They meet here, swap over, an' each bunch turns back with horses to sell, horses that've been stolen too far away for the owners to trace. I've had it figgered out for some time. Now I know. This old scarecrow is their lookout!"

"Well, well, so we have a lawman with us?" Russian Jack got up, and there was a queer, primitive dignity in the way he stood. He sent his bitter smile at Roone. "And what else has the sleuthing brain unraveled?"

"Those two horse-thief gangs meet right here on this ledge!" blared Roone. "I'm out to get 'em, one by one. The Stockman's Association has put up plenty heavy bounty. It's my biggest case, an' I'm sure goin' to finish it! That fire o' yours is a signal. They send some kind o' signal when they're comin', then you signal back the all-clear, with that fire."

"Blue fire," assented the old Russian, almost pleasantly. His manner was confident, amused. "Old mine timbers, you know. The quicksilver in them burns blue. Their signal is a shot. They send one rider far ahead to the foot of the peak, here, and he fires once, then rides back. I heard a shot some time ago, and the sound of a departing rider. Naturally, I thought it was the signal and I answered it. Sorry if my blue fire frightened you."

"It wasn't so much the fire, as that yell," said McLean.

"Ah, yes." Russian Jack sent his penetrating stare at him. "First the fire, then later I send the call. They serve a double purpose, and keep Indians from coming up here. No doubt, you saw those foolishly big hoof marks? I chiseled them years ago, for the same purpose."

Craft and guile lay under his surface blandness. It seemed to Devlin that the man was deliberately talking to stall for time, and he wondered what kind of hole card the cornered old wolf might be holding out.

"Stick out your arms," snapped Roone, and twisted his bandanna. "I'm goin' to tie that hook an' that hand together, an' they'll stay that way till I turn you in! Devlin, don't you horn in on this, or—"

He got no chance to finish. With a breathed oath of lost patience, Devlin picked him up by the thick neck and the seat of the pants, and stalked with him to the edge of the cliff. The back storeroom of the Morning Glory, built on the brink, had collapsed, and the rotted floor tilted like a steep chute into space. Devlin looked at it, and raised the squirming Roone higher over his head.

"Slide, roll or jump?" he queried.

Below the outjutting wreck of the floor, a roomful of empty bottles had slid off to fall down the slope. A shallow cup in the steep slope had caught most of them, and they lay piled there in thousands, most of them broken and all empty. Bronco City had been a live town while it lasted, no doubt of that. Roone saw the strewn mound of broken glass, and let out a yelp.

"Devlin! Hell's gates, don't!"

"Goin' to behave?"

"Yeah—sure! Let me down!"

Devlin tossed him into the cobwebbed barroom, via a gaping hole in the wall, and walked back.

Russian Jack was still peering at McLean, still wearing his thin, subtle smile. He asked silkily, "May I favor you with an explanation of anything else?"

"Uh-huh," Devlin took him up on it. "Who's that girl we saw?"

Russian Jack's expression changed. His face went blank, and his eyes were masked and inscrutable when he turned to Devlin. "Girl? There is no girl up here. There is nobody living here but me. Allow me to warn you. Take that lawman, and go. If you stay the night, it will be again tomorrow what it has been for twenty years—nobody here but me!"

He turned again to McLean. "Tell me where the silver is hidden. It can do you no good. You would never live to take it away!"

McLean shook his head. "It's buried somewhere on this peak; that's all I know. I don't know exactly where."

Disbelief curled the Russian's thin lips. "You are lying, of course."

"So are you," put in Devlin. "You're lyin' about that girl. She's here, an' you know it!"

The Russian turned on him like a tiger, his iron hook raised to strike. McLean whipped his rifle level.

"Steady!" he warned. "Yes, I think you're lyin', too. We sure saw her. I'm wonderin' where she went and where she is now."

The sharp and sudden report of a shot cracked out from somewhere above, and McLean ducked as his hat went spinning.

"I reckon," said Devlin, getting away from the firelight, "she gave you a pretty good hint that time!"

Roone came running from the ruin of the Morning Glory, bareheaded, cobwebs in his hair and a graze down his face.

"Up there on the rock!" he barked, and fired up at the top of Bronco Rock. "Use your rifle, McLean!"

His shot was answered promptly by another quick report, the flash of it winking from the black shadow above the overhanging stone horse. A call came down in a girl's voice, plain and distinct in the clear air. "Go, you men! If you harm the *Dogi-srlaani*, I'll kill you!"

Roone uttered a furious oath, his forearm dripping blood from a straight furrow in the flesh. He went sprinting up the street, surprisingly fast on his short legs, firing up at the rock and heading for the cabin.

"Damn murdering bloodhound!" McLean ground out and started after him.

Devlin ran an examining stare from the top of Bronco Rock down to the cabin beneath it. Trouble in the party. It looked as if McLean and Roone might tangle before this thing was through. Well, that might simplify matters for an opportunist to take the lion's share of the *contrabando* silver, later on. He shrugged his broad shoulders, his hard eyes reflecting the chill philosophy of his jungle code.

"C'mon, Russian Jack," he commanded. "You an' me are goin' to stick close together. I've an idea you've a hole-card ace ready to play, but as long as you keep in my sight, we'll get along fine. Damned if I'm not beginnin' to like you!"

They entered the cabin to find McLean and Roone facing each other in the near darkness, like two bristling dogs sparring for an opening to get at each other's throats. McLean's eyes glittered his anger against the man who would shoot at a girl, and he held his rifle in both hands, a finger on the trigger.

Devlin brushed by them and began examining the cabin, aware of Russian Jack's close attention. The cabin didn't look as old as the rest of the town. It stood back from the street, built with its rear wall up against the cliff, so that Bronco Rock shielded it from the sun by day. Devlin went over the wide, hand-hewn planks of the rear wall, testing each one with a thrust of his shoulders.

One gave under the pressure, scraping inward at the bottom. Devlin shot out a barring arm, fending off the lunge of Russian Jack. "Too late for that, Russian Jack!" said the gun fighter shortly, and pushed the plank all the way in. "Get in here ahead o' me. I aim to explore, an' I wouldn't want that hook o' yours in the back o' my neck."

The Russian stared long at him, at the empty hands, at the slight bulge under each side of the austerely clerical coat. His black eyes went narrow and still, recognizing from old experience the coldly efficient look of a master gunman. He peered at Devlin's dark face, searchingly and thoroughly, and finally led the way through the opening.

Devlin stepped in after him, and heard McLean and Roone following, their fight suspended for the moment. The opening led into a tunnel, square, low-ceilinged, with timber supports. He knew it for an old abandoned mine shaft. The cabin had been built against its mouth, hiding it. The holes of other mine workings gaped in the face of the cliff, he had noticed, but all were at the western end of the town. Much gold had been taken from under the belly of Bronco Rock. This shaft went farther and higher, burrowing deep into the peak, making use of natural cracks and crevices, and following the erratic drift of the worked vein.

The floor tilted upward, and at times walking became an ascending scramble. Devlin, striking matches, kept close behind Russian Jack, who maneuvered his way with an agile ease that spoke of long familiarity with the bends and slopes of the tunnel. The ground had been stamped hard, but Devlin noted here and there, in the dust, the imprint of a small moccasin.

They turned a bend, and the pale reflection of moonlight struck rock up ahead. The air was clean, but tangy with the smell of red dust. A shadow moved across the moonlit patch of rock, and out of the silence above broke the voice of the girl, strained, frightened, but firm.

"Don't come any farther or I'll shoot!"

IV.

Devlin took a hold on Russian Jack's ragged shirt, and kept on climbing. "You can shoot if you want," he called up, "but your first bullet will prob'ly hit this here *Dogi-srlaani*, an' maybe he wouldn't much care for it!"

The shadow slowly withdrew before their advance. As the shaft came to an end, Devlin took quick stock. Here, hidden from below by the arched back of Bronco Rock, was a huge hollow in the rock, a natural cave that extended deep into the cliff, with a shelving ceiling and a level floor. Moonlight flooded part of the floor, showing a cot

and table, and other signs of occasional occupancy.

Through the gaping mouth of the cave, the grayed expanse of the desert could be seen, merging without line into the night sky in the distance. A straggling clump of stunted cedar grew in the rocky soil at the mouth, helping to hide the cave, even from the desert.

The girl stood with the moonlight behind her, a heavy carbine in her hands. Her simple white dress and the almost transparent gold of her flowing hair gave her the appearance of something unearthly and intangible, as if she would melt away and vanish into nothingness at the first threatening gesture. The carbine looked incongruous in her small hands.

Roone thrust his way past Devlin and Russian Jack. He glared at the girl. "You winged me, you little wild cat! Drop that carbine, or I'll take my belt to you an'—"

Again he didn't get the time to finish. McLean took two swift strides, spun him around, and hit him. The straight drive of his fist sent the bounty hunter reeling across the cave to sink dazedly down on his knees, mumbling and shaking his square head. McLean dragged off his hat with a knuckle-skinned hand, and his formal bow to the girl struck Devlin as a little ludicrous under the circumstances.

"I apologize for our—er—companion," said McLean. "Let me assure you we mean no harm of any kind."

"It's just a friendly little call," murmured Devlin, reaching for the carbine. He'd never trusted the combination of girl and gun. Too unpredictable. "Thought we'd drop by," he added gravely, "an' see how things are goin' on the old plantation."

McLean sent him a look, and he met it with amiable blandness. The girl, Devlin saw, was pretty. More than pretty. Beautiful, maybe. Certainly eye-catching, with her golden hair, dark-brown eyes and fine features. Holding her head high, like a fawn scenting the air, she had all the unconscious pride of youth and health. Not much more than about eighteen, he estimated. To Michael McLean, idealist and gentleman of old Louisiana, she probably looked like heaven's prize-winning angel. Well, it was fine to have sparkling young illusions like that. For his part, Devlin's tastes ran more to good horses, a full money belt, sky-limit stud and a straight flush deviously acquired from the jobbed deck of hawk-eyed and ambitious opponents. The rest of life's pleasures were all very well, too, but not to be confused with serious pursuits.

McLean and the girl were gazing at each other, and gradually the girl grew less like a wild thing ready to run, while much of the raffish look of the adventurer dropped from McLean.

Devlin nudged Russian Jack. "Is she kin to you?" he asked.

"My granddaughter, Tandra," answered the Russian. His eyes burned with savage light. "If you dare touch her, if she is harmed—"

"She won't be!" snapped McLean, and his glance whipped challengingly at Devlin.

"Well, that's settled," drawled Devlin. It seemed to him that McLean was taking in considerable territory, but he let it go. He nudged the Russian again. "You keep her hidden up here?"

"Naturally." The Russian's glance was distrustful and bitter. "Most men are animals, beasts. Pecos Wild and those others are worse. They do not know of her, do not even suspect her existence. If they did—" He spread his good hand. "I am only one man. They are many, all armed. They think me a crazy hermit. Perhaps I am. They allow me to live and stay here, as long as I am of use to them. For two years I have been practically their slave. I warn you again, leave this place! If you are found here, and this cave is discovered—"

A single shot rapped its quick note down on the desert. The girl gave a start and her dark eyes went to her grandfather. Russian Jack drew a deep breath.

"It is Pecos Wild and his horse thieves," he said quietly. "I expected them tonight!"

His calm was forced. The blue veins stood out on his high, broad forehead, and the glare of madness again crept back into his cavernous eyes.

"They have seen my fire. They will wait now for my call." His voice grew jerky. Control was fast slipping from him. "It's too late now for you to get away without being seen. They will reach and find this cave. After killing you they will find Tandra!"

"Take it easy, old-timer," growled Devlin. His mind leaped ahead, probing and testing the potentialities of the near future. "They're waitin' for your wolf howl, huh? Well, go down to that ledge an' give it to 'em!"

"Damn it, Devlin, are you crazy?" Roone stumbled to his feet, holding his bruised jaw.

"No, I reckon not," said Devlin pleasantly. "How 'bout you? Would you want that bunch to get suspicious, not hearin' the signal yell, an' come prowlin' up on the prod to look-see what's wrong? We'll stay right here while Russian Jack signals 'em in. We'll stay here till they're gone again. The girl will stay right here with us. *Sabe,* Russian Jack? If you tip our hand to that bunch, you sacrifice your granddaughter along with us?"

The old freebooter nodded his white head, his lips strained and taut as he fought for self-control. The madness of a mind given over to a single obsession lay very close to the surface of his mocking calmness, breaking through in moments of tense excitement or shock. He ran his burning gaze over them all, lastly the girl, and descended into the mine shaft.

Minutes later, they heard his hair-tingling howl,

full-throated and baying, with the end chopped off short at the scream's pitch. Waiting, Devlin chewed on his black cigarro and hoped the Pecos Wild crowd wouldn't stay too long. No food or water up in this cave, as far as he could determine. He heard McLean and Tandra talking together over on the other side of the cave, low-voiced, and listened in on their murmuring.

"I have lived here almost as long as I can remember," she was saying in her quiet, musical voice with just the hint of an accent in it. "Grandfather came and got me, after mother died, and brought me here. There was nobody else to take care of me. He has always been very good and kind to me. I am the last kin he has in this country. We have a garden farther up the peak, and we grow our vegetables. Sometimes we hunt for meat. I do the shooting. Grandfather can't use a rifle, because of his lost hand, and we haven't a pistol. He spends nearly all his time searching the peak. Some day, he says, I shall be a rich woman and go out into the world, after he finds what he is searching for. He will see that I take my place in Russia, he says, with his family. But I don't know. He thinks of me as Russian. But I think of myself as American. My mother was an American, and so was my grandmother."

"What's he searchin' for?" Roone broke in. "Silver? How much of it?" He also had been listening to the murmured conversation, and the hungry, scheming glint had come again into his hard, round eyes.

Tandra shrank back a little at the harsh and brittle demand, and McLean swung his angry stare at the lawman. "Tend to your own affairs, blood-money man!" he flung at him, and in the next moment was murmuring polite reassurance to the girl.

Devlin grinned to himself. This McLean pilgrim wasn't such a bad mixture of man, at that. Tough enough for any kind of company, yet with manners to fit into any elegant tea party. He could take care of himself, whether on a Southern lawn or in a tight spot like this. Sandy Mac had probably been that kind of hombre, too.

The beat of many hoofs rumbled up the peak, and Devlin moved nearer to the cave's gaping mouth. From here he could see, silvered by the moonlight, the sweating backs of horses pouring up the old wagon road. The band numbered well up in the hundreds, he estimated, and had been driven far and hard. Riders appeared, flanking the horses and turning them off toward the western end of the ghost town, where the ledge ran wide and long. There the springs were, and most of the old mine workings, with the remains of wooden flumes leading to the sluice boxes.

The steady thunder of hoofs, settled and changed to the mingled noises of horses milling around in strange ground, squealing and stamping in nervous unease. Riders began drifting into the town's dead street, a continuous stream of them, until a small army was gathered below Bronco Rock. All of the men were heavily armed, with filled cartridge belts sagging at their waists and rifle butts poking out from saddle scabbards. They spoke little. Hard wariness marked the way they stared about them. Russian Jack came walking up the street to them from his signal fire, slowly and without greeting.

Another knot of riders came in at a canter, strung out, following a squat, heavy-set man who rode a blaze-faced sorrel as if he were a part of it. His sombrero hung back by its chin cord, and his bushy, yellow hair flared out in the wind. Two guns bulged on his thighs, hung very low to accommodate the enormous length of his arms.

"That's Pecos Wild," whispered Tandra.

The horse thief rode past his men and drew up in a jump, alongside Russian Jack. "Yuh damned fool—" Profanity spilled in a roaring voice. A long arm shot out, and Russian Jack's head was jerked savagely against the saddle by his white mane of hair. A gun pressed against his neck. "Who yuh got hidin' up here? Talk fast, or I'll blow yore head off!"

The Russian choked out some sort of reply. Pecos Wild continued to shake him by his hair. "Yo're lyin', blast yuh! Hey, fetch up them two horses we found!"

Devlin, watching and listening, bit clean through his cigarro. He took a fresh bite and cocked an eye at Roone, who met it with a stiff grimace. In this moment the merciless little bounty hunter showed his nerve.

"It's the first time I ever lost my horse to a nag lifter without cravin' to do somethin' about it!" he whispered huskily.

One of the riders below led two saddled horses forward, a striped buckskin and a big, clean-limbed black. Pecos Wild stuck a thumb at them.

"We picked 'em up at the foot. Would 'a' missed seein' 'em, 'cept for the stripes on that buckskin. That black beauty stood still as a damn statue. Whose are they? If yuh got a coupla law spies hidin' up here, I'll roast yuh over yore own fire!"

"There is no one here except us, I tell you." The lie came calmly and steadily from Russian Jack. "I know nothing about those horses. Perhaps they strayed in from the desert."

The murmuring of the men floated clearly up to the cave, the great curve of Bronco Rock magnifying every sound. Some were disposed to believe the hermit. Others were still suspicious. Pecos Wild swung the Russian away and released him.

"Make a search!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Look all through them old mine workin's. An' keep an eye on this old cattawampus, too!"

The crowd scattered, a few staying with the horses to off-saddle and water them with the stolen band at the springs. The tramp of boots boomed

through the rotting building, and the crash of floors, collapsing under the weight, mingled with the oaths of stumbling men. Pecos Wild bellowed a command at Russian Jack, who went back to his fire and threw on more fuel to make the blaze brighter.

Devlin picked up Roone and carried him to the brink of the cliff.

Devlin flattened his wide lips and swore softly behind them. The fact that Pecos Wild wanted the signal fire kept burning meant that he was expecting the Mexican outfit to come up from the south soon, to meet him here at the rendezvous and trade stolen horses. The two gangs would probably spend some time drinking together, before parting again. Even if the Pecos Wild men missed finding the hidden mine shaft, it meant being holed up in this cave for an uncomfortably long time.

"Maybe they won't find that loose plank," spoke up McLean in a low mutter. "They're not looking for anything like that."

Devlin nodded. "Maybe not. If they don't we got to stay here quiet till they go—an' they'll leave us without horses!"

"We can hold out a long time up here," said Roone, and fingered his well-filled gun belt.

"Yeah," Devlin agreed with bleak comfort. "I knew a feller who lasted seventeen days without food or water, before he died."

Roone blinked his round eyes, and looked around at the cave. "Hell!" he grunted, and wiped a hand across his mouth. "I'm thirsty already. Bet it gets hot up here in the day, huh?"

"Yes, it does," assented Tandra. "I used to creep down into the mine shaft where it is cooler, while those men were here. But I always brought in food and water, of course, to last me until—"

"Quit talkin' so much about water!" snapped Roone, and nursed his bullet-torn arm. He hadn't forgiven the girl for the painful flesh wound, nor Devlin and McLean for their various methods of blocking his violent tendencies. Devlin caught a look in the brittle eyes that set his long fingers to tapping absently on a holster. Another highly constructive killing might be called for, before the end.

V.

The morning sun crept up out of the east, shortening its shadows and heating the night-cooled air. Devlin stretched his long arms and legs, and gazed across at McLean. Tandra had gone to sleep, sit-

ting beside her new friend, resting against him, with her golden head on his shoulder. McLean's arm was around her. He was wide awake, and his position didn't look any too comfortable, but he seemed pretty lighthearted about it.

Devlin shook his head. If the worst came, there were, anyway, two people in this cave who would go out in gay style. He crawled over to the cedar fringe at the mouth, and peered through it down at the ghost town. Roone came and crouched low, near him.

"They've quit searchin', huh?"

"Hours ago." Devlin drew back carefully. "They're eatin' breakfast. Smell the coffee and bacon? Russian Jack's still keepin' his blue fire—Hm-m-m. Look yonder. There comes the rest o' your bounty money, if you could collect! An' there goes that Muscovite wolf howl. I swear, this place gets real populated. Keep your head down. Likely some Indians in that Mex party, an' they got sharp eyes."

Coming up from the south across the desert, long dust clouds trailing behind, moved a bobbing mass of riders and running horses. The morning sunlight glittered on bandoleers brassy with cartridges, and high-peaked sombreros made pointed dots of the riders' heads. Not a big outfit, Devlin observed, but well armed and splendidly mounted. Magnificent riders, they trailed their long band of stolen horses with expert ease, toward the southern slope of Skeleton Peak.

The dust boiled its following course to the foot of the rocky slope, and there hung back. Again the old wagon road thundered to the beat of hoofs, and the horses swarmed into the holding pasture of the western ledge. The riders rode into the town in a bunch, swaggering grandly in Latin mood, their chattering voices high and boisterous. Loot, to those border raiders, was the core of life, relished and intoxicating.

Their leader, a resplendent and debonair figure, rode in ahead on a beautiful palomino with silver mane and tail. His high sombrero, heavily brocaded and tilted at an angle, shaded a smooth, olive face, glistening black eyes, and a thin pencil line of trimmed mustache. A white silk shirt shone richly under his short jacket, and at his waistline hung a brace of silver-ornamented pistols in carved and intricately laced holsters. He looked like a wealthy *haciendado* out for the morning air, immaculately clad for the benefit of such señoritas' eyes as he might hopefully encounter.

Devlin stopped chewing on his cigarro, his narrowed eyes dourly stabbing down at that dashing *renegado jefe*. He growled, deeply and harshly, "Damn him!"

"Know the gent?" queried Roone.

Devlin turned his dour stare on the lawman. "Ever hear o' Don Ricardo de Risa—Rico, the Laughin' One?"

"Sure."

"Well." Devlin nodded down. "There he is! Lawmen don't often get the chance to see him an' live very long, so take a good look."

"So I've heard." Roone's iron-hard mask didn't crack, but his eyes flinched a trifle. "Friend o' yours?"

"Hm-m-m, yes, an' no," answered Devlin, and let it go at that. He and the don had crossed swords often and left scars behind. Many times he would have gladly shot out the life of Don Ricardo, and as often the don would thankfully have done as much for him. That each still lived, was a recurrent source of surprise and some irritation to both, as well as being an acute inconvenience at odd times.

The black horse stood in the street, racked with a few others. It was too much to expect that the don's quick eyes would miss seeing that big black, and Devlin had no hope of it. Don Ricardo, one-time rebel general and *muy grande caballero*, bandit and horse thief extraordinary, loved horses too well to let an animal like that pass by his notice. And Rico knew that black as well as he knew the saturnine face and long-barreled guns of Preacher Devlin.

The don flung up an arm in gay greeting to Pecos Wild, and pulled in his palomino to a rearing halt. "*Hola*, my friend!" His careless voice, with its cultured accent and slurred syllables, rang out in half-mocking and extravagant salute. "*Buenas dias*. My poor eyes are once more charmed by the glad sight of your honest face! Again, I see and envy your tall and handsome form, your gracious smile, your— *Por Dios* that horse! Where did you get it? Tell me—pronto!" He ended with a curt snap of command, his smile gone and his suddenly dangerous eyes darting everywhere.

Pecos Wild, already scowling at the don's mocking greeting, stuck his long arms akimbo and took stance. His big head went back arrogantly on its short, thick neck. "Don't take that high tone with me, Risa!" he rumbled. "I ain't one o' your Injuns. An' cut out that fancy talk. Yuh pass out too much of it, an' it don't set well with me!"

His men, gathered around the cook fire, rose and stood very still. Smoldering antipathy lay close to the surface.

Watching, Devlin grinned slightly at the don's prompt change of manner. Rico and his men were outnumbered four to one. Such odds were not beyond acceptance, but they were to be taken only when the end was worth while. For all his superb nerve and cheerful insolence, Don Ricardo knew how to be discreet.

"My good friend, a thousand pardons!" The fine sombrero was doffed with a bow. "You take me too seriously. We do such a splendid business

together, it would be foolish for us to quarrel, yes? But that black horse—grand animal. It surprised me."

"Found it down at the foot o' the peak, along with that *bayo coyote* nag," volunteered Pecos Wild gruffly, and turned on his heel. His men hunkered down again, watching the Mexican party dismount. The two horse-thief outfits did not mix. Expediency alone had brought them to working together, but no sort of friendship marked their dealings with each other; that was evident. Two such widely dissimilar natures as those of Pecos Wild and Don Ricardo de Risa could not be expected to jog along in harmony.

Devlin kept sight of Don Ricardo, strolling restlessly about while his men made camp. It was an hour before the don wandered to Russian Jack's signal fire, now dying out, with a pile of unburned timbers beside it. He stood there a moment, broodingly, and then bent quickly to touch the ground. When he straightened up again, scrupulously wiping his finger with an immaculate white handkerchief, Devlin knew what it was he had found.

Roone leaned cautiously over and whispered in Devlin's ear, "That's blood from my arm he's found! Look! Now he's pokin' around to see what else he can find. That hombre's just too damn smart to live!"

Devlin nodded, keeping his eyes on the don. From an impartial point of view, it was interesting to keep gauge of his old enemy's mental processes. That flashing smile and handsome face masked a shrewd, razor-sharp brain. Masked the clicking reactions of a cold and ready killer, too.

The don paused in his search, and leaned over the unburned timbers. He touched one, lightly, and cocked his head to gaze speculatively at it from various angles. His air was musing and absorbed, as if he had unearthed a problem that intrigued him.

"A bullet hole," murmured Devlin. "The girl's first bullet, prob'ly, when she knocked off McLean's hat for him. McLean, you slipped up on your manners that time. Ought've removed your hat in the presence of a lady, even though we didn't know where she was. It might've saved us a lot o' trouble that's headin' our way right now!"

Don Ricardo swung slowly around on his high heel. He gazed quizzically at the bullet hole in the piece of timber, drew his eyes from it, and followed the line of the bullet's flight, from the slant of the hole, until he was looking directly up at the great arched back of Bronco Rock.

Devlin, screened by the cedar fringe, didn't move a muscle. He watched Don Ricardo quirk an eyebrow and run a considering glance over the buildings along the street. Finally, the don rested his weighing regard on the small cabin, examining the way it was built against the inner cliff. It was the only one built just that way.

The gay smile flashed out. The don left the dying fire and came sauntering sedately up the street, nodding affably to Pecos Wild and his men as he passed. He stopped by the black horse and stroked its neck. Still gently stroking with horsewise fingers, he deliberately raised his head and smiled up at the rock. He lounged casually on to the cabin, then, tossed a laughing remark to his encamped men, and entered, closing the door after him.

Devlin turned his back on the cedar fringe, faced the mine shaft at the rear of the cave, and flipped out both guns from under his black coat. It wouldn't take Don Ricardo long to locate that loose plank. While he waited, Devlin thought of all the times he and Don Ricardo had matched wits and double-crossed each other. Today was Rico's day. He'd make the most of it.

A light tread sounded in the mine shaft, and Don Ricardo stepped up into the cave, his white teeth flashing in a charming smile, his tapering hands resting negligently on the twin butts of his silver-mounted guns.

"Devlin, *viejo compañero mio!*" He bowed from the waist, eyes sparkling. "My old friend, this is a happy surprise!" His glance blandly ignored Devlin's leveled guns to dart rapidly over McLean, Roone and finally to rest on Tandra. He caught his breath, doffed his fine sombrero with a flourish.

"But you have company," he murmured apologetically. "Forgive my intrusion."

"Make y'self at home, Rico," Devlin drawled. "Stay for breakfast?"

"Thank you, no." The don's appreciative gaze remained on the girl. He hadn't missed the lack of food and water in the cavern. "My men are preparing mine. Perhaps you will join me, instead? Let me urge you! There will be young steak, freshly made bread of fine Indian wheat, Spanish coffee—"

"Shut up!" snarled Roone.

"But I insist," pursued the don softly. "I must insist that you descend and accept my poor hospitality."

Devlin shifted one gun a trifle. "I insist that we don't!"

The don looked pained. "Must we argue, *amigo*? Arguing is often so noisy. But you have not introduced me to your friends. The lady is?"

"Tandra, granddaughter of Russian Jack," answered Devlin, taking no pleasure in the ceremony. "The readhead yonder, is Mike McLean, of Louisiana an' other parts. The other's Roone. Folks, this is Don Ricardo de Risa, of Old Mexico, till the rurales made it too hot for him. As neat a horse thief an' bandit as ever lifted his grandmother's weddin' ring, so pin up your pockets!"

Don Ricardo flushed slightly, but bestowed upon them all a deep bow. "Granddaughter of Russian

Jack?" he echoed. "That wily old wolf! He kept her hidden all this time, eh? But the rose has for too long blushed unseen in this cave. *Amigo*, let us compromise on this matter of hospitality. You and Señors Roone and McLean will remain here. The lady will grace my breakfast table."

"Why, you—" McLean started forward.

Devlin gestured him back. "You know any reason I shouldn't kill you, Rico?" he queried bluntly.

"Several," replied the don pleasantly. "A shot would betray you, for one."

"I could dent your skull with a gun barrel without much noise."

Then don lifted his shoulders, keeping his distance. "An interesting proposition," he asented, hands on his holsters, "but not, I fear, too simple of execution. Besides, my men will call me to breakfast soon. They saw me enter the cabin. They would search—" He spread his fingers. "Need I enlarge on the distressing consequences? My men have somewhat bizarre methods of taking vengeance. The lady, I regret to say, would not be spared. Their chivalry, you understand, is a quality that is guided wholly by my presence and commands."

His smile broke out again. "Under the spell of such a breakfast guest," he ventured, "I would probably forget about this cave. Pecos would ask questions, of course, but I would tell him that I brought her along in my saddle pocket!" He laughed, his dancing eyes warm on the girl. "The lovely *señorita* will accompany me?"

"She will not!" rapped McLean, stepping in front of Tandra.

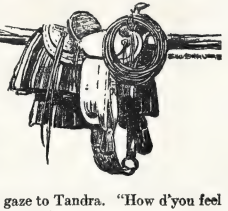
Don Ricardo shrugged. "Nevertheless, I shall expect her," he insisted gently. "If, at the breakfast call, she does not suddenly appear from nowhere, I shall feel impelled to speak of this cave. Naturally, certain consequences will follow. To starve slowly to death up here in this cave, cut off from escape by fifty armed men, would not be pleasant. I am offering you a simple way of escaping such unpleasantness."

He smiled maliciously at Devlin. "*Compañero mio*, I feel for you, truly I do! Such a choice must be difficult for such a man as you. I know how a man's pride and self-respect are shattered when he must save himself at the price of a woman. But life is sweet, yes? I shall await with much interest your reaction to this little problem. *Señorita*, until the breakfast call—*adios!*"

He bowed and withdrew, his chuckle drifting back as he descended into the mine shaft. Devlin let him go, but his gray eyes glinted balefully, like those of a baffled wolf as he holstered his guns. His old enemy had him up a stump, treed short and caught fast, with only one shabby and none-too-certain course left of getting out of the trap. Devlin looked at McLean and both shook their heads.

Roone saw their grim exchange of signals.

"Damn it, Devlin, don't be a fool!" he rasped. "Let the gal go! We'll die here like trapped rats if we don't play up to that Risa feller. An' she'll starve to death with the rest of us, anyway!"



Devlin sent his gaze to Tandra. "How d'you feel about it?" he asked curtly.

The girl shook her head. "I'll stay here!"

"That settles it," said Devlin. "Quiet, Roone, or I'll quiet you! We got till the breakfast call. Steak, fresh bread, Spanish coffee—damn!"

VI.

The heat of the day began filling the cavern. Devlin edged over the cedar-fringed mouth and stared down. He saw Don Ricardo emerge from the cabin's door below, meticulously brushing dirt of the mine shaft from his sleeve and smiling to himself.

Devlin looked around for Russian Jack, and caught sight of the giant hermit standing in the street, his black, burning eyes fixed on Don Ricardo. Russian Jack lifted his stare quickly to the top of Bronco Rock, and back again to the don. Obviously, he had guessed that Don Ricardo had discovered the secret of the cabin. His mouth took on a twist, and he made a stride toward the don as if to attack, but changed his mind. Abruptly, he wheeled and went stalking up the street toward the western ledge. His whole demeanor, the tilt of his white head and his clenched fist, told of the madness rising within him.

The Russian disappeared around the bend of the ledge, and Devlin's attention went back to Don Ricardo. The don strolled jauntily over to the cook fires of his encamped men and stood there rocking on his heels, awaiting his sumptuous breakfast. He seemed very lighthearted and happy. Devlin earnestly wished it were possible to put a well-placed bullet into that debonair figure. He heard Roone pacing restlessly behind him in the cave, to and fro, like a caged tiger that knew it was destined for death.

Roone halted. "Blast it, I ain't goin' to die here like this! Y'-all can do as you want, but I aim to get out o' here!"

"You'll stay right where you are!" growled Devlin. "If one of us breaks out, it'll give away the rest of us. Rico hasn't blowed his gaff yet. There's still a chance he won't!"

A sudden shouting broke out below, and McLean called tensely, "Look! The crazy galoot!"

The men of both gangs were on their feet, staring at Russian Jack, who had burst into the town from the old mine workings with an iron keg clasped to his chest. It was a keg of blasting powder he held, and from a hole in the top issued a smoking stub of fuse. Insane frenzy contorted his gaunt face, and he gibbered as he ran. He swung the cumbersome, fuse-lighted bomb high above his tangled head, and charged with it straight at Don Ricardo. Total annihilation was plainly his mad object. He packed enough blasting powder in the keg to blow the whole town to atoms.

There was a rush as men scattered before the wild-looking madman, obeying their first instinct and diving for cover. Don Ricardo stood his ground and coolly unholstered a pistol, but one of his Mexicans snatched up his carbine and got ahead of him with the first shot. The carbine spat once, and Russian Jack staggered. It spat again, and he sprawled headlong to the ground, almost at Don Ricardo's feet, the keg rolling from his outstretched arms.

Don Ricardo nimbly blocked the rolling keg with a foot, and plucked out the smoking fuse. With it held daintily in his fingers, he gazed about him with condescending amusement for those who had run.

Tandra gave a low, hurt cry as Russian Jack fell, and Devlin looked back over his shoulder.

"Too bad," he growled. "Too bad Russian Jack didn't finish what he— Where's Roone?"

He looked down again in time to see Roone make a hurtling exit from the cabin below. The bounty hunter, always the opportunist, had seen in the disturbance, his desperate chance for making a getaway, and was taking it.

He butted the unsuspecting Don Ricardo full in the back, bowling him over, and went racing up the almost emptied western end of the street. His gun thudded as he ran, shooting his way out. A Mexican, jumping from a sagging doorway, sank over the threshold. Then the little bounty hunter was around the bend, while a few following shots cracked tardily behind him.

The street became alive with men, swarming in pursuit. Don Ricardo picked himself up and joined them, his face dark with anger for the indignity he had suffered. The hoarse voice of Pecos Wild roared out oaths in a stream. "Git him! I knew there was law spies hidin' up here somewhere! Where'd he come from?"

Russian Jack moved and rolled over, raising his head. Pecos Wild aimed a savage kick at him as he passed. "Yuh blasted ol' double-crosser! By the horny hoof, I'll roast yuh alive for this!"

A horse went tearing down the old wagon road from the western ledge, Roone flattened over its back and neck, riding without saddle or bridle. It flashed over the hump and plunged out of sight with a slithering clatter of hoofs striking and sliding on rock. Devlin squinted dourly after it, knowing that the following shots missed. At that desperately risky gait, Roone would either break his neck in a spill, or make his getaway.

A few men caught up their horses and went spurring in pursuit. Others sighted long shots over the rim of the ledge, trying to head off the fugitive with a bullet. McLean came up from the mine shaft.

"He left the plank open," he announced. "I closed it."

Devlin nodded. Pecos Wild was bellowing commands. "Rip the damn town up an' find out where that jasper popped from! There's another one of 'em hidin' somewhere up here, or I miss my guess! Hell, I knew them two saddled horses didn't just stray in."

Don Ricardo came walking back down the street, alone. He took a swift glance around and entered the cabin. A moment later he bobbed up out of the mine shaft. His anger had subsided, and he seemed not too displeased by the turn of events. He addressed himself directly to Tandra.

"*Señorita*, your impetuous grandfather is not yet dead, unfortunately for him." He spoke with businesslike curtness now, and kept a wary eye on Devlin's hands. "Pecos Wild thinks he hid spies up here, and intends to burn him alive for his treachery! You would not wish that to happen, no?"

The girl shuddered. "No— Oh, no!"

"Of course not," agreed the don kindly. "You can save him from such a gruesome end, if you wish."

"How?" demanded Devlin.

"Very simple." The don met his cold eye. "If she will leave this cave and . . . ah . . . place herself under my protection, I will guarantee that Russian Jack dies cleanly and peacefully from his wounds. *Amigo*, it is time to face the facts. This place is certain to be discovered now. They will tear up the town until they find it, and then it will be merely a matter of time before you and McLean die, either from their bullets or starvation. Of they may smoke you out. There are various ways," he ended brightly.

"Thanks for the sympathy," commented Devlin dryly.

The don inclined his head. "Apart from my great sympathy for your predicament," he went on glibly, "the manner of your coming demise is overshadowed by my very genuine concern for the welfare of the *señorita*. There is no real reason why she should share your distressing fate. I can save her. Also, I can save her grandfather."

Tandra pulled away from McLean. "I must," she whispered. "I must go with him!"

"Wait." Devlin waved her back. "Rico, has it occurred to you to wonder why I am here? Have you ever heard o' Russian Jack's lost fortune in

contrabando silver? It's buried on this peak, an' I think I know where! That's why I'm here."

"Yes?" Don Ricardo was politely incredulous. He had been tricked too often by the preacher. "I remember other occasions when you dazzled and befogged my reason with splendid visions, and had me tearing off along a fool's trail with rainbows in my eyes. Curiously, I always just missed the pot of gold! And now it is silver, mere silver. *Amigo*, you are slipping!"

"You think I'm lyin'?" Devlin pulled out Sandy Mac's letter.

"Oh, no—no!" The don made a deprecatory gesture. "Let us say, rather, that your imagination matches your other natural gifts. Is that a letter? I am sorry, but time presses, and my literary tastes must remain unsatisfied at present. Were you offering me the secret of this—ah—*contrabando* silver? So generous of you—and so like you! *Señorita*, are you coming?"

Devlin didn't like the set-up—he'd never trusted the combination of girl and gun.

"Yes," stammered the girl. "I . . . I'm coming!"

Devlin breathed hard, holding down his impulse to draw guns and have it out. "Rico, I'll make a deal with you. If you'll leave that girl here, an' hold that Pecos mob off from findin' this cave . . . an' save Russian Jack from the fire—"

"Then you will make me rich," Don Ricardo finished for him.

"I'll produce that silver, later, an' hand it over to you!" Devlin promised, inwardly seething.

"You sound so positive, I almost believe you," conceded the don. His eyes were amused and mocking. "Rather than argue further, I will tell you what I will do. I will take the *señorita* with me merely as hostage for the silver. I will start south at once for Mexico, but on the way, I shall camp for three days at Yellow Well. You know the place? During that time, the *señorita* will be my treasured guest. No harm shall come to her."

"You promise that?" broke in McLean huskily.

"I pledge my sacred word," responded the don simply. "But at the end of that time, Devlin, *amigo*, if you have not come with that miraculous silver, then I shall go on to Mexico with my guest. Is that—er—thoroughly understood?"

"Yeah," said Devlin shortly, "but how'll I get to Yellow Well, with that mob blockin' me up in this hole?"

"That," murmured Don Ricardo, gallantly offering his arm to Tandra, "is your problem." He and Tandra vanished into the mine shaft, the girl trembling, the don quietly humming.

McLean's face was a haggard mask. Devlin glanced at him and went back to his lookout behind the scrub cedar. Three days. The don's bargain was a jest. It would tickle his sense of humor to wait those three days, knowing that he stood in no risk of giving up his hostage. It occurred to Devlin to speculate as to how the don would go about getting the girl safely past Pecos Wild and out of the ghost town. There'd be some stiff opposition to that, and Pecos Wild had by far the strongest force behind him. The men were wrecking the town, spread out all over and surging in groups from place to place. The riders were coming back from their fruitless chase after Roone. No chance of getting that girl by unseen.

Devlin shook his head. That was the don's problem.

"What the devil! Hey, where'd yuh get *her*?" It was Pecos Wild's voice, for once muffled and choky with amazement. The stocky outlaw stood in the street, jaw agape, blinking at the fair-headed girl.

Don Ricardo took a graceful stance, one polished boot on the powder keg, and drew out a thin, gold case. He chose a long cigarette and carefully lighted it.

"Pardon? Oh—the girl. I found her in my pocket. She desires to see Mexico, and I have promised that she shall gather flowers from the floating gardens of Rio Lerma, view old Popocatapetl by moonlight, join in the gay life of Mexico City—"

"Yuh found her hidin' up here!" broke in Pecos Wild. His light-green eyes shrank to staring slits, running over the girl who knelt by Russian Jack. "Loot law, Risa, loot law! She's as much mine as yours? Don't try to hold out on me!"

His men left their searching, and came crowding up, eying the girl. The don's Mexicans gathered silently behind their *jefe*, looking worried. Badly outnumbered as they were, they would fight if given the sign, but it would be a losing fight from the start.

Don Ricardo blew a thin spear of smoke, entirely cool and at ease. "It is true," he admitted. "Loot law. Let me confess that there is other loot here to be divided, also. A fortune in hidden *contrabando* silver! I—ah—learned of its existence when I found the girl. It seems to me that a fair division—"

"Where?" The shout came not only from Pecos Wild, but from most of his crowding men.

"A fair division," pursued the don equably, "might be arranged by my keeping the girl, while you take the silver. Great stacks of it, piled high as your head, and worth—"

"Where?" The eager, hungry shout drowned him out again.

Don Ricardo nodded toward the cabin. "There is a loose board in the back of that cabin—"

He had no need to go further. Pecos Wild led the rush, his mob pressing at his heels.

Up in the cavern, Devlin flipped out his guns and trained them on the mine shaft, breathing unrefined oaths. A bang and a crash, told of more than one plank being driven inward, followed by the noise of trampling feet and hard-breathing men. He waited until he judged they were around the last bend, then his left gun stabbed one fiery spurt.

The noise abruptly ceased. A voice sang out: "Hell, somebody else up there!"

"That's no lie!" responded Devlin in a growl, and hammered his next shot down the mine shaft. "McLean, if you're good an' fast with that rifle, now's the time to prove it!"

Yells and the solid reports of exploding cartridges

came up from the mine shaft, and the noise of the rushing advance began again. Devlin stepped back from the spatter and whir of ricocheting bullets, and crouched low, while McLean took military kneeling position with his rifle. The rifle whammed its short, sharp note, and Devlin checked his next trigger pull, saving a bullet. The first scrambling body, bounding up, tumbled limply back again.

A gun barrel poked up over the edge, blazing blindly into the cave, and McLean uttered a brief gasp. Devlin whipped a low shot, and the poking gun jerked away with a dull clang. He spoke without looking around. "Hit?"

"Hm-m-m," gasped McLean. "Got to keep the rifle going with one hand now. Broke my shoulder, I guess. Damn the luck!"

"Damn Rico!" grunted Devlin, and cut loose with both guns as three more leaping figures erupted.

A sullen boom, sonorous and deafening, shuddered the cave and shook down fragments of stone from the roof. Smoke and dust suddenly puffed out of the mine shaft as if from a gun barrel, filling the cave with a dry, throat-choking haze. A grinding crash of falling rocks, loosened by the explosion, ran in minor key to the desert's rumbling echoes of the blast. Men, bellowing and frantic, came swarming up out of the mine shaft with the dust. Devlin, shooting fast through the haze, drove them back into the tunnel, and for a moment, shocked nerves brought a mumbling, coughing lull.

"That blasting powder!" rasped McLean. "He's set it off at the mouth of the tunnel . . . blown it in . . . trapped the whole lot of us!"

From somewhere below, outside in the clear air of the ledge, rang the chuckle of Don Ricardo de Risa. "Devlin, *amigo*, I trust you will meet me at the rendezvous with that precious silver! However, some sort of mischance may detain you. Therefore, purely as a fond remembrance of you, I am taking your magnificent black, along with all the rest of the horses! It shall have good care, never fear. I have coveted it a long time, and now I yield to temptation. You may inform Pecos that I hereby dissolve our business relationship. *Adios!*"

His chuckle floated off. A jest was a jest, to be consummated with keen enjoyment, and this was the cream of them all. Soon the scrambling hoofbeats of driven horses rattled down the old wagon road, along with the high-pitched shouts of the Mexican riders. The racket faded away down the slope, changed pitch as the desert sand was reached, and settled to a steady drumming that rapidly died in the distance.

VII.

The men trapped in the mine shaft, driven to desperation by the choking dust and smoke, staged another rush for the cave. Devlin, firing and jamming fresh shells into his guns, grimly considered the coming finish. He and McLean could measure their lives by the weight of their cartridge belts.

He could appreciate without enjoyment the don's crowning jest. Rico had played his cards neatly, and left them all holed up together to fight it out like Kilkenny cats, while he rode gayly off with the spoils.

"Devlin!" McLean called out. "Russian Jack's on his feet and shouting up at us. He's got a rope!"

Devlin pitched a shot at the last retreating figure. "I like that Muscovite more'n ever." He crouched and changed position, awaiting the next rush. "If you an' he can work out a way of gettin' that rope up here, go to it."

Russian Jack, his tattered, bloodstained body swaying, held the rope coiled in his one hand. It was an old derrick rope, dry and stiff. The homicidal insanity had passed, leaving his gaunt face grimly calm with the full comprehension that in Devlin and McLean lay the last chance of saving his granddaughter. His sunken black eyes were steady, estimating, dogged with purpose.

He caught his balance, bunched his bony shoulders as if gathering what remained of his once-great strength, and hurled the rope. It slapped against rock, a yard short of the cedar fringe, and fell in a tangle. McLean, vainly trying to reach out and catch it, groaned. That dying giant, with his strength fast running out, had made a superhuman effort and failed. To throw a rope fifty yards straight up, was an amazing enough feat for any man. He'd never better that first attempt.

Russian Jack laboriously gathered up the fallen rope and coiled it again on the ground. Slowly and uncertainly, like a man very drunk, he staggered to the rim of the ledge and came back with a rock. He sank heavily to his knees and fumbled for a long time with the rope and rock. Pushing himself up onto his feet, the rock tied to the rope's end and dangling from his hand, he looked up.

Maddeningly deliberate, he began swinging the rock in a widening arc. Twice he stumbled, and the rope wrapped around him. At last with a jerk that bent and straightened his whole frame, he let it go. The slung rock, with the rope snaking up behind, struck a cedar root and bounced off. Reaching far out with his good arm, McLean barely caught it, and began sliding out, head first.

Devlin heard the strike of the rock. He looked around in time to see McLean going, and grabbed an ankle. He hauled him back, saw the rope, and his lips quirked in a grin. "*Bueno!* Drag up the rest of it, an' I'll lower you down. That is, if I can keep those hombres back while I do it."

"No." McLean shook his head. "They'd get you in the back. I can wind it round my legs and slide down, using one arm."

Devlin shrugged and tied the dangling rope to the toughest cedar limb he could find. "Go ahead.

Here, take one o' my guns. If you make it safe, you can try an' hold back that mob from makin' a target of me while I come down. They'll take this cave soon's I leave."

He turned back to the mine shaft as McLean began his descent, and slanted a bullet down it to give notice that he wasn't asleep. Soon he heard McLean's hail from below. He holstered his gun, slid through the cedars, and began lowering himself hand-over-hand, by the rope. It didn't give to his weight. He drew no special sense of security from that. The rope was old and brittle, all its elasticity dried out.

McLean's gun barked twice. Devlin looked up as he descended, and caught a glimpse of a head jerking back. The mob was already in the cave. Gunfire crashed raggedly from it. McLean stepped in closer to the cliff, little darts of dust flicking up from the ground behind him, and fired again.

The taut rope suddenly gave, lengthening a few inches. Devlin raised his head quickly. A bullet had cut through the rope, somewhere above. Two strands of it fell away and hung down, slowly unwinding under the strain. The rope began to turn, swinging him around. Devlin took a rapid calculation and looked down. Another turn, and the aged rope would be unwound at the point where the bullet cut it, and then it would snap. No time to slide down. In about two seconds, it was going to go, and he'd be lucky to end up with broken legs and maybe a broken back.

He was hanging level with the belly of Bronco Rock. Below the belly, crumbled rock lay piled in a steep slant against the cliff's face, débris of the wind that for centuries had carved out the great stone horse. Between the rubble slope and the rounded belly a natural crevice had formed, deep and low-roofed.

Devlin decided on the crevice as his best bet. He kicked with both feet at Bronco Rock, swinging himself far out. When he swung back under, the rope broke to the hard strain, as he had gambled it might, and left him plunging through midair at the crevice. Watching from below, McLean held his breath as the gun fighter shot feet first, into the crevice and rolled out of sight.

It was some time before Devlin crawled out, smeared with dirt, but still hanging on to the remains of the rope. He looped the rope around a rock, let himself down to the roof of the cabin, and jumped the rest of the way.

"I've done my share o' foolishness," he growled when he hit bottom, "but I never thought I'd turn mountain goat for the sake o' some silver! Keep 'em occupied up there, McLean."

He strode over to Russian Jack, who sat on the ground with both arms pressed against his bloodied chest. The Russian slowly raised his wild white head, a far-away stare in his eyes.

"A wasted life!" he whispered harshly. "The long, long years . . . plotting, scheming, struggling to gain wealth . . . wealth that was mine in Russia. They exiled me for intrigue. Siberia. I escaped. Once I was rich . . . born into careless spending, extravagance. I swore I would be rich again. My son . . . he was killed by my side, raiding the *contrabandistas*. His daughter . . . last of my kin . . . the captive of beasts! Ah, curse that silver! It held me here, a slave, wasting my years in searching. And I never found it . . . I never found it!"

Devlin bent over him. "We're goin' after your granddaughter."

The sunken eyes shortened their far focus. "How? No horses—"

"I've walked before," said Devlin wryly, and went up the street to the body of the Mexican that Roone had shot down. He stripped it of gun and belt, and returned to Russian Jack.

"Here's a gun an' shells." He dropped them in the old outlaw's lap, and gestured up at Bronco Rock. "Likely, they'll string their belts an' clothes together an' climb down, after we leave. They'll take out after us. I'd like a head start on 'em. Hold 'em up there as long as you can, huh?"

The Russian picked up the gun in his one hand, and drew back the hammer. A dim trace of old daredevilry lighted up his ghost-pale face.

"As long as I can," he whispered, and sighted a shot that clipped off a cedar twig. "A pleasure."

Devlin headed for the old wagon road. "C'mon, McLean," he called curtly. "S'long, Russian Jack."

Russian Jack, if he heard the farewell, gave no sign. He was taking careful sight again with the gun, completely absorbed in his last fight. As Devlin and McLean tramped down the old wagon road to the desert, shooting broke out again up in the ghost town, and they heard the wild wolf howl ringing clear and savage above the echoing reports.

The Harque Hala lay sullen and shimmering under the noonday sun, scarred by a trail of hoof-prints that lined toward the south. To the north, the high point of Skeleton Peak rose above the crinkled crests of the Vultures.

Devlin wiped sweat from his broad forehead, and glanced sharply at McLean, stumbling a little to the rear. "Rico's got Indian guides, an' he's been over this route before," he remarked. "They must know where there's water in this damned desert. If we keep to their tracks—an' if a windstorm doesn't come along to cover 'em up—we'll maybe get a drink sometime. You better quit at the first waterhole."

McLean halted. His face was drawn with pain, and he nursed his useless, blood-caked arm with his good hand.

"I better quit trying to keep up with you, right now," he said. "How far is it to Yellow Well?"

"About sixty miles, more or less. That shoulder

isn't broke, or you'd be in a fever. Bullet tore the muscles, prob'ly."

McLean nodded. "The pain will die down by tomorrow, but right now I'm giddy with it. Can't see straight, and I keep falling in these damn sand holes. I'm holding you back. You go ahead, and I'll follow as I can. Maybe you can get there before they leave. Don't know what you can do against that outfit, though."

Devlin had no very clear idea about that, either. He knew the caliber of the fighting raiders who rode with Don Ricardo, and the don had a dozen of them with him.

"If you got to drop behind," he said, "you might's well give me back that gun I loaned you. I may need both of 'em. Er—in case I don't happen to see you again—s'long."

Tramping on alone, with McLean falling steadily behind, Devlin estimated his chances of finding Don Ricardo at Yellow Well. The don would wait the stated three days; of that he had small doubt. The chances lay in his ability to get there before the time was up. As to what might happen after that, he left such matters of the future to whatever circumstances he could force to his advantage.

The don had given his pledged word, and his inordinate pride in always keeping his word could be relied upon, though it didn't at all prevent him from stacking the deck so that he wouldn't have to keep his bargain.

Devlin knew Rico pretty thoroughly, just as the don knew him. Like expert chess players that had too often matched skill and wits, each knew what to expect from the other, though sometimes one managed to spring a surprise checkmate. Devlin thought of his horse, of his own already sore feet, of the powder blast, and of Tandra.

"Damn him!" he muttered. "If he harms that horse!"

The moon had not yet risen, but even in the darkness, Yellow Well looked what it was: a relay station, relic of an ambitious stage line that had gone bankrupt. The wranglers' bunkhouse, now a camp shelter for prospectors and certain fugitive wayfarers, boasted a porch but no windows. Dim cracks of light filtered through the sun-warped boards. A broken Concord coach with one wheel gone leaned on its axle in the yard, a shadowy silhouette of past glory. The posts of the corral had fallen, but an occasional stamp and whinny, a quarter-mile off, told of many horses under night guard.

Devlin limped up to a remaining corral post and leaned against it, taking stock. His feet were swollen in his worn and broken boots, and thick dust covered him with a grayish hue. He scratched the black stubble on his chin, tried to work up enough saliva to wet his parched throat, and silently damned everybody in the lighted bunkhouse. Quite a few in there, from the sounds of bottles, high voices and laughter. Not much chance of catching Rico unawares, without his men around him.

He moved away from the corral post and on to the building. Only one thing to do, and that was go in there and play what cards he had. He hitched his gun belts as he stepped lightly up onto the porch and pushed at the door. It scraped in an inch, then held fast, barred on the inside. The slight sound brought immediate silence within, then the creak of floor boards. A challenge rapped out.

"*Que es?*"

"All right, Rico," Devlin kicked the door. "Open up. It's me, an' I want a drink!"

A startled exclamation sounded. The thick silence held, and the floor boards creaked again. The door rattled, was opened part way, and a shining black eye appeared to study Devlin's dark and dour face.

"Damnation!" Don Ricardo flung the door wide, careful to step well back into the room. "I was celebrating your—hem! I mean, I was sunk in grief, thinking—"

"Yeah," grunted Devlin, brushing by him into the room. "I heard you sobbin'." He went to the table and helped himself to the first bottle at hand, disregarding the staring eyes and restless hands of the Mexicans.

Don Ricardo automatically proffered a clean glass, snapped open his gold cigarette case, and reached for one of the lighted candles on the table. He was obviously a little shaken and trying to recover his poise.

Devlin filled and emptied the glass twice, but passed over the scented cigarettes. While he drank, he framed his first step into the problematical future. He set down the bottle.

"We made a deal, Rico."

"Yes . . . yes, of course. A deal." The don nodded and also took a drink. "Let me see, what was it?"

"That girl." Devlin had taken note of the bolted door at the far end of the bunkhouse; the boss wrangler's room. The girl would be in there. "I've come for her."

"So I see." Don Ricardo's ease of manner returned swiftly. "Ah, as I now recall, *amigo*, there was also some talk between us of silver, yes? *Contrabando* silver, wasn't it? Or has it changed to something better?"

"It's still silver." Devlin placed the various positions of the don's men. Some of them held their drawn guns openly in their hands, fingering the triggers. Devlin automatically checked the fact that he was bucking a hopelessly losing game. "Maybe you'd like to see some o' it? A fortune in silver, Rico. Couldn't carry it all. I walked here, thanks to a scummy thief who lifted my horse!"

Don Ricardo accepted the insult with surface

equanimity. "Silver, I believe, is still in general circulation," he pointed out politely. "It is not hard to obtain a few coins?"

"These are all dated twenty years back," said Devlin. "Yet they're not worn down. The edges are still sharp. An' they're tarnished. Anybody can see they've been stored away a long time. Here, take a look, all o' you." He drew a fist from his pocket, and opened it to display the pile of heavy Mexican coins in his hand. A couple dropped to the floor and rolled away. Some of the men scooped at them.

Don Ricardo bent a languid eye over the handful of silver, while the rest of his men crowded up to get a look. He poised a hand over them, smiling. "May I take one?" he murmured.

"Sure," Devlin consented, gently and invitingly. "Take 'em all, Rico—damn your heathen hide." He brought up his opened hand, slammed the silver hard into the smooth, smiling face, and booted the table a kick that sent it toppling over with a crash. As the candles winked out, he drew his guns and lunged through the darkness for the bolted door.

Movement sounded in the room. Something knocked off his hat and shattered to pieces against the door above his head. He shook broken chinaware from his crisp black hair, retrieved his hat, and got away from the door.

Preacher Devlin and Don Ricardo cut loose like the gun masters they were!

VIII.

The bunkhouse burst alive with a rackety uproar. Here and there a gun blazed recklessly into the darkness, accompanied by crackling Spanish oaths, and Don Ricardo could be heard fervently swearing in two languages. A howl rose and trailed away to a groan, as somebody blundered into a bullet, and the floor shook to the impact of two men who tripped over the upturned table.

Devlin, on hands and knees, searched for the bolted door of the closed room. He found it, drew back the bolts, and eased through. As he crawled into the room, he heard swearing splutter off into a yell of pain. Somebody had stepped on the don. With a hope for good luck, Devlin chopped a shot in the direction of the yell, and closed the door after him.

"That," he muttered, "is a waste o' crockery an' a damn unladylike thing to do!"

"Oh! I thought— I don't know what I thought! Is it you? Is he with you? Michael McLean, I mean." The words came tumbling. Tardily, the last question came. "Did I hurt you?"

"Liked to've brained me, is all," Devlin threw back gruffly. He shook his head over the phenomenon of females. Always thinking first of some man or other, instead of the urgency of the present. "No, Mike McLean isn't with me," he added. "He's still wearing down his boot leather out on the desert, I reckon. No windows in here, either, huh? Boarded up. It looks as if we don't leave here real soon."

He felt around fast for something to barricade the door. There was nothing. The bunk was built

in, and the table and chair were too light to be of any use.

Tandra moved to his side and touched his arm. "Listen."

The clamor in the bunkhouse had subsided. A weak band of light shone through under the closed door. The voice of Don Ricardo rang out, angry and metallic. "Devlin! Are you in that room?"

"Good guess, Rico," drawled Devlin. "What're you aimin' to do about it? If you come shootin', you'll likely hit the girl. That won't keep me from smokin' you down, though! Want to cut a new deck an' deal again?"

"Never, curse your foul, underhanded jugglery!" rapped the don, all outraged virtue now that the trick was on him. "Come out and meet me, man to man!"

"Come in here an' meet me, man to *cucuracha!*" countered Devlin, and cocked his guns. "You got too much help out there for me to handle at one time. C'mon, Rico, if that's how you want it!"

A heavy object crashed the door wide open, letting a fan of light into the room.

"I have stood too much!" exclaimed the don piously. "*Hombres,* take him! Forward, *mis valientes!*"

His *valientes* were not too fast in their advance. To enter that room, where two guns waited to greet them, was like marching over a cliff to prove their courage. They would do it, but not with happy alacrity. Devlin didn't expect any immediate rush.

Their shadows fell across the threshold, and paused there. A muttering ensued, with much flourishing of carbines and pistols, and dark threats. From where he stood, crouched and waiting, Devlin could see part of the long room and the outer door. He couldn't see Don Ricardo, nor pick out his shadow on the floor.

A carbine slid around the door frame. "*Ceda!*"

"Not just yet, *hombres!*" Devlin sent a bullet that splintered the stock of the carbine.

Like an awaited cue, the shot brought them to the point of attack. They came piling in, jamming through the doorway in a feverish desire to get into the battle and have it over. Devlin worked his triggers, guns level with his chest, and the detonating roar of them broke the keyed-up morale of the storming party. A milling scramble, and they were out in the long room again, leaving four tangled bodies blocking the doorway.

Devlin shook out empty shells and reloaded, approving with a nod the sight of Tandra picking up a fallen pistol. The girl, he recalled, could shoot and wasn't backward about doing it.

"Why'n't you lead your *pelados* next time, Rico?" he called out.

"By Santo Gaspar, I shall! *Mis hombres*—" The don cut off the rest.

Somewhere outside, a hoarse voice hailed the bunkhouse. "Tandra—Devlin! Get out, quick! They're coming—the Pecos Wild bunch—right behind me!" A fist pounded the outer door.

Don Ricardo uttered a sharp exclamation. "Who is it? Is this a trick?"

"Trick be damned!" The fist pounded again. "They've been after me since dark, following the trail on foot. I can hear them coming right now, can even see them! They're like crazy men, and they'll wipe out every—"

A gun cracked in the near distance, and a bullet flicked its way through the flimsy wall. A rumbling chorus of shouts sounded after it, and the muffled tread of feet.

"Well, Rico," Devlin called, "it looks like your chickens are comin' home to roost, hm-m-m?"

"And yours!" snapped the don. He went on hurriedly, in a better tone, "*Amigo,* let us drop our . . . ah . . . little disagreement, and join forces, yes? We have you blocked in there—"

"An' I've got you blocked out there," cut in Devlin. "I've got that outside door covered, mak-

Pecos Bill's wild bunch launched a savage, smashing attack on the bunkhouse.

in' it about even. All right, suits me." He stepped over the bodies, Tandra behind him. "Let McLean in."

A Mexican jumped to the door, unbarred it, and McLean lurched into the candlelight. More shots, closer in, thudded with the opening of the door, and splinters flew from the frame. McLean, smothered with dust and his shoulder cased in a hard clot of blood, stared unseeingly about him with fatigue-dazed eyes, until Devlin and Tandra entered his focus.

"There might be time, yet!" He fumbled his way to them. "Where are the horses?"

"The horses!" echoed Don Ricardo, and barked a short laugh. "Would we run from such scum?"

"We sure would!" put in Devlin. "But the horses are too far off." He snuffed out the candles with a swipe of his hand. "So we'll stick an' shoot it out. I swear, I'd as soon shoot from a paper bag as this shack. Rico, you prance so gay, let's you an' me step out there an' do a little somethin'."

"I was about to suggest it."

"Good. For once we agree." Devlin went to the door. "Mike, you stay with that girl. Let's go, Rico!"

They stepped out together, closing the door behind them. The moon was coming up, its edge just beginning to show. Devlin glanced at it. In a few minutes there would be moonlight enough for any kind of marksman to hit what he aimed at, if he wasn't too unreasonable. Don Ricardo put his back to the bunkhouse and slid out his guns.

"Not there, Rico, not there," murmured Devlin. "That busted Concord coach."

They climbed into the tilted Concord. A mumble of voices reached them, and the crunching of sand. Pecos Wild and his sore-footed, thirst-crazed followers were creeping up on the bunkhouse. Devlin looked again toward the rising moon. There wouldn't be any long-drawn siege. It would be a smashing and vengeance-laden assault, and soon to come, timed before the full rise of the moon. Pecos Wild wouldn't want to be out in the moonlight when the heavy shooting began.

Don Ricardo took a seat in the coach, spread his legs and leaned well back.

"Old *compañero!*" he breathed. "Ah, it is a pity that you and I are always at each other's throats. We could work so well together—if we could trust each other! We are—what is the word?—*simpatico*. Yes, a pity. If we live, then I shall kill you, of course. And that, too, is a pity, because—"

"Save your pity till the deed's done," muttered Devlin. "Here they come!"

"How is the moon?"

"Be pretty near full in five minutes. Hope your *pelados* can hold out that long."

In the sky's reflection of the coming moonlight, knots of men showed up as murky shapes against the bare ground, running for the bunkhouse. They fired as they ran, their guns streaking flash spots in the darkness. Spurts answered them from

Though his garb hinted of austere ways and ministerial pursuits, Devlin was ever the finished gunmaster.

knotholes and cracks in the wooden building. A man sagged at the knees and went down. Another reeled to a halt, hands pressed against his body, and stood slackly swaying. The rest charged on, and those in the lead hurled themselves at the barred door, battering it with boots and gun butts. Others veered off and went prowling along the building, shooting into the boards.

Moonlight touched the roof and traveled down it as the moon rose. The door gave in. The spurts from the cracks and knotholes ceased, and the doorway became a tight, concentrated battleground. Men were fighting hand to hand, struggling back and forth over the threshold, while the porch trembled to the stamping mass of them. The don's Mexicans, trapped, were putting up a desperate defense.

The moonlight swept down onto the porch and enveloped it, picking out in clear detail, the backs of the fighting mob. All had converged on the broken doorway now, packed close and forging forward against it.

"Now!" muttered Devlin, and stepped out of the Concord. "Luck, Rico!"

"And to you, *amigo*," whispered the don, and stepped out beside him.

Their four guns thundered together.

The Pecos Wild mob, caught off guard in their moment of triumph, were slow to grasp the knowledge of the sudden flank attack. The increase of gunfire failed, at first, to register its significance on their inflamed minds. They pressed on against the bunkhouse, possessed of the one idea of forcing entry and slaughtering the remaining defenders. Those in the rear began falling, thinning down the packed mass, until the cursing shouts of hard-hit men brought others whirling around.

The moonlight, relentlessly brightening, fell on startled faces and wavering guns that sought the source of the unexpected blast. The jam at the doorway split, and from it a bushy, yellow head barged across the porch, butting men from its path. A bull's roar issued from it.

"The Concord, damn yore eyes! There they stand!"

Don Ricardo, reloading his guns with nimble fingers, snapped their cylinders shut with a flirt of his wrists, and leveled them, his teeth shining white in a tight-lipped smile. A stocky, long-armed figure jumped from the porch. Glaring, head lowered, Pecos Wild came weaving for the Concord at shambling run, shooting. He had never been known to run out of a fight, and his raging temper had carried him through many a one.

With a thin gasp, Don Ricardo dropped his guns, clapped both hands to his head, and fell back against the Concord. Devlin, who had counted his shots, didn't waste an empty trigger pull. He stopped, exchanged his weapons for the don's, and let drive from close to the ground. They had nice, easy actions, lighter on the pull than his own, though the silver butts didn't quite fit his fists. He went on working them out, still stooping, as Pecos Wild lay scratching the ground with a spurred heel.

Bridle bits jingled somewhere, along with the creaking of leather. Devlin pitched his last two shots, and listened. The firing had drowned out any sound of coming horsemen. The porch emptied of life, men scattering off into the shadows. Against

the night skyline other men appeared, advancing in a tightening circle on the relay station.

A harsh and brittle command rapped out. "Stand an' throw up yore hands, all o' you! This is the law talkin'!"

Out of the bunkhouse door slipped three Mexicans. They began running, making a dash for the horses.

"Stand, I say!" The command rang out. "All right, boys, let 'em have it!"

A short volley ripped from the inclosing circle of men, then silence, but for the steady crunch of feet. Devlin dropped the don's guns into the pockets of his long coat, after loading them. He loaded his own, holstering them, and looked at the don.

"Feel like runnin', Rico? That's Roone with a posse!"

Don Ricardo struggled to his feet and hung on to the Concord. "I am dead!" he groaned. "My head is smashed to—"

"You got a bone-graze, is all, an' likely a horse-sized headache," interrupted Devlin, without sympathy. "I don't know what you'll do with that cloud-punchin' hat now. You'll either have to carry it or hang it on one ear. The hang rope'll soon settle that problem, though, so I wouldn't worry about it. Here comes Roone."

Roone marched across the yard, a half dozen men at his heels and others forming a closely knit ring around the relay station. He halted, facing the Concord, and his gun-slung followers halted with him.

"Devlin—Risa, get your hands up!" he barked. "Your trail's done run out. I got a posse here—forty o' the toughest I could gather in Aguila—an' they're r'arin' to go! It's been a long chase. I thought you'd dodged me when I got back an' found y'-all gone from Skeleton Peak, till I saw your southbound trail. But I always win in the long run, an' I'll collect plenty this trip. Get 'em up!"

IX.

Devlin moved out from the shadow of the Concord, not raising his hands. He let them dangle, and walked forward to meet the grimly victorious little bounty hunter. Behind him, Don Ricardo looked vainly about him with aching eyes for his lost guns, and followed with dragging feet. McLean and Tandra emerged from the bunkhouse. A knot of Roone's hired man hunters closed in on them.

"Nice winnin's, Roone, huh?" Devlin commented.

"Sure!" Roone eyed him, his squad covering the gun fighter. "I done what I set to do, an' I collect ev'ry head that's worth a dollar, includin' yours! Looks like y'-all had quite a party 'fore I got here. Saves me trouble. Dead men pack easier'n live ones, an' the price is the same! Thousand a head,

That flat-crowned, broad-brimmed hat of Devlin's suggested both a Quakerish and a rakish past.

an' five thousand apiece for the ringleaders. I'll tag you as a ringleader, Devlin, along with Risa an' Pecos Wild. Give up your guns!"

Devlin ran his bleak gaze over the covering muzzles. Slowly, he drew his guns and handed them over, butts foremost. Roone took them, and looked a shade relieved to have them in his hands. His round, unwinking eyes glinted.

"I've heard a lot o' talk about silver," he said casually, "what's the truth about it?"

"*Contrabando* silver," Devlin nodded. "Big stacks of it, Roone, worth a whole lot more'n all your damn blood money."

Roone ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. "Where is it? Give me that letter I saw, or do I have to search you?"

"Here it is." Devlin took the letter from his pocket. "There's a page missin', but if you've got a brain, maybe you can figure out where that silver's buried."

Roone tossed a command to his possemen. "Watch 'em close, an' shoot fast if they make a move!" He stalked into the bunkhouse with the letter, and lighted a candle.

Soon he reappeared, the letter open in his hand. "All I can find out from it is that this Sandy Mac, Navaho Jones an' the other feller hid the silver under 'Clear Day'—wherever that is." His brows were furrowed deep, and greed had put a bright glitter into his eyes. "What's the answer to that, Devlin? D'you know?"

"Yeah, I know." Devlin fished out a black cigarro and bit off the end, "I'm the only one who does, an' I don't aim to spill it, Roone."

"So?" Roone pulled some coins from his pocket. "I found these in the shack yonder. They some of it?"

"Uh-huh. Just a few specimens. All the rest is still where it's been for twenty years or more. I couldn't carry much. Had to walk here."

Roone dipped a glance at the gun fighter's worn and broken boots. "I see. Devlin, you'll hang if I take you back to Chino Valley! Money ain't much good to dead men. So how 'bout a trade?"

"Certainly!" put in Don Ricardo promptly. "A trade, of course! We will trade the silver for our—"

"We, Rico?" drawled Devlin. "Somehow, I wasn't includin' you."

"Merely an oversight, due to the . . . ah . . . stress of the moment," responded the don forgivingly. "The thought of that hang rope disturbs also my mind, as well as yours. Now, the trade. I would suggest that while the girl and I ride ahead, you remain here to explain thoroughly to Roone how to find—" He caught Devlin's cold eye on him, and decided not to push the innocent proposition any further.

"Roone, I'll tell you what Clear Day is," said Devlin. "But first you'll give horses to McLean an' the girl, an' let 'em go. You'd never collect any bounty on those two, anyway. Then I want my horse an' my guns, an' a head start."

"I, too, have a fine horse—" began the don.

"You'll ride what's given you!" grunted Roone. "All right, Devlin. Hey, give that feller an' gal horses, an' let 'em go!" He stared down at the letter in his hand, but not before Devlin saw the cold mischief in his eyes. The bounty hunter was out for all he could get. He wouldn't let ten thousand dollars in bounty slip through his grasp without a try at holding it.

McLean and Tandra were gone, riding Mexican saddles and horses that had belonged to the don's men. Devlin held the bridle of his black, while the don gazed bitterly at a broom-tailed little roan and much-patched saddle that had been the best he could do for himself.

Roone gestured to Devlin. "Come in the shack, where we can talk private an' give me the answer to that Clear Day thing." He emptied Devlin's guns and handed them over. "Don't load 'em!"

Devlin accepted the guns and slid them into their holsters, but shook his head. "Not the shack, Roone," he disagreed gently. "No, you walk with us till we're out o' sight an' gunshot o' your Aguila crew."

Roone pressed his lips tightly, shrugged, and rested his right hand on his gun butt. "Suits me, I reckon. You two walk ahead with your horses, where I can see you."

They left the yard, moving northward in the direction McLean and Tandra had taken.

"This is far enough," snapped Roone. The relay station and the Aguila posse were still in plain sight in the moonlight, and within gun range. The men were staring after them, their attitude tense and expectant. "You can speak up right now, Devlin, or not at all. I ain't goin' to walk all night."

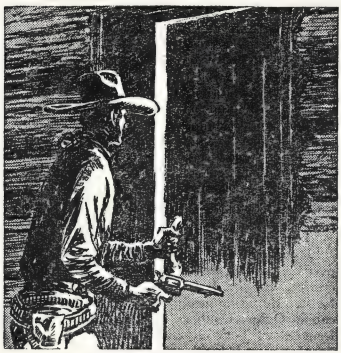
Devlin and Don Ricardo halted with their lead horses, and turned. The don tried to maneuver himself around to the off side of the little roan. Roone's gun flashed out, leveled, and stopped him.

"No tricks!" snarled the bounty hunter. "Spill it, Devlin."

Devlin started to light his cigarro, changed his mind, and shoved the matches into his coat pocket. "How old are you, Roone?" he queried.

Roone blinked. "Forty-three. Why?"

There was a time for even the bravest man to high-tail it—and Devlin put the spirited black into action.



A crisp order snapped from the man with the drawn gun: "Come out—and make it fast!"

"Forty-three," Devlin mused aloud. "D'you drink?"

"Never."

"That explains it." Devlin cocked an eye at the don beside him. "Rico, you prob'ly began drinkin' pretty early in life. There used to be some good old brands of whiskey, to hear the old-timers tell it. I've listened to 'em braggin' in barrooms about how much better whiskey used to be. 'Specially old prospectors an' miners. Most of 'em are dead now, but they sure could spout. Maybe you've heard 'em, too. Maybe you can remember the names o' some o' those brands they spoke of, whiskey brands that nobody hears about nowadays. One or two, in partic'lar."

"Oh . . . er . . . yes," nodded the don bewilderedly. "Let me see. There was . . . hm-m-m . . . 'Golden Sunshine,' for one. And wasn't there a 'Parker Special'?"

"Right," agreed Devlin. "Most ev'ry minin' town an' camp had its fav'rite, like they do now. But the brand those old-timers blowed most about was a whiskey called 'Clear Day.' Smooth as a rusty file, an' strong enough to do housework. I reckon they liked their whiskey in Bronco City, judgin' by—"

"Say, what're you gettin' at?" burst out Roone.

"Judgin' by all those empty bottles," Devlin finished. "Remember that pile o' bottles on the slope, Roone, back o' the Morning Glory? I figure that back room didn't cave in an' fall of its own accord. I figure somebody could've knocked out the props from under it, lettin' that room full of empty bottles smash down the slope an' bury somethin' they wanted buried."

Roone let out a long breath. "It don't sound just right," he muttered.

"You've got some o' those dobe dollars," Devlin reminded him. "Look 'em over again. Where d'you think I got 'em?"

Roone took them out, frowning, and for an instant dropped his stare to them. Devlin withdrew his hand from his coat pocket. One of the don's loaded guns poked from his fist.

"See what I mean, Roone?" he murmured. His tone changed to a deep and grating rasp. "Drop that gun an' back up, you bounty-chasin' buzzard!"

Roone jerked, hesitated, and let his gun fall. He back-stepped fast, saying nothing, his eyes murderous.

Devlin whipped a long leg over the saddle of his black, and started off at once. The don mounted in a jump and lit into the roan with both spurs and the rein ends. Roone's shout rang out, and rifle fire spattered from the relay station. Riding bent over, Devlin heard Don Ricardo curse. The roan, hit, shied across the black's path, almost spilling it, and went over in a floundering somersault.

The don, flung over the roan's head along with the broken saddle, bounded up and took a flying jump at the passing black. His hands clawed saddle strings and cantle, and his body thumped lightly up behind Devlin.

"Damm the brute!" he spat angrily. "I knew it was unlucky as soon as I saw it!" He drummed his heels against the sides of the racing black.

"Quit kickin' my horse," Devlin flung at him. "If this gait's too slow for you, get off an' walk!"

"Somebody ahead!" The don felt stealthily around Devlin for a gun. "Two riders!"

"Yeah, McLean an' the girl." Devlin drove his knuckles at the exploring hand. "They waited for us. White folks are like that."

The early morning sun slanted its rays at them, and touched the far-off tips of the White Tanks ahead. The don, riding double behind Devlin, broke a long silence. "Was there really any truth in your talk of *contrabando* silver, *amigo*?"

"True as the mornin'," answered Devlin, and drew rein. "Let's rest a spell."

Don Ricardo slid stiffly to the ground from his uncomfortable seat. "I have never known when to believe you," he sighed bitterly. "Now I shall be even less sure! Was . . . was there really very much silver? Just a little, eh? Not enough to bother with."

"Stacks of it," said Devlin. "Packed in leather sacks that have split with the weight of it."

The don groaned his anguish. "And it could so

easily have been mine! Now it is Roone's. That animal! What pleasure can such a one gain from wealth, when he doesn't even drink! Ah, what a pity! What a waste! I could have used it to show the *señorita* my Mexico, the gay life of—"

"I don't reckon she'd be interested," put in Devlin dryly, with a nod at the girl and McLean. They had halted, but so far had forgotten to dismount. Michael McLean, adventurer and fortune hunter, didn't appear to be bowed down with grief over the loss of the silver.

Devlin stretched his arms and yawned. "Water, up in the White Tanks," he remarked. "Sorry you have to leave us, Rico."

"Eh? What?" The don turned a startled face to him. "But, *amigo*, I am not leaving you."

"*Amigo*, you are!" corrected Devlin. "My horse is in a stew, carryin' double. It's only about hundred an' twenty miles south to the border, an' you'll prob'ly be able to pick up somebody's horse on the way. Anyway, you'll get used to walkin', after the first sixty miles or so. Here are your guns. I've emptied 'em. S'long, Rico."

"The trick of a . . . a—" the don stuttered. "To make a man walk!"

"Sure was," agreed Devlin. "My feet won't be right for a month. All right, McLean, let's push on."

They left Don Ricardo standing ankle-deep in sand, his fine sombrero tilted rakishly over one ear because of his furrowed scalp, arms raised to heaven and swearing.

"Y'know, McLean," said Devlin thoughtfully, "it's maybe a good thing Roone knows as little about whiskey brands as he knows Navaho powwow. Far's I know, there never was a whiskey by that name. But the labels on those empty bottles are all faded an' gone, I reckon, so he'll never know any different."

"Huh?" McLean swung around in the saddle. "You mean you don't know where the silver is hidden?"

"I mean no such thing," murmured Devlin. "It happens I *sabe* a little Navaho. When Navaho Jones proposed that they bury that silver under 'Clear Day,' he was givin' the Navaho name for Bronco Rock, only Sandy Mac didn't know it. He didn't say 'Clear Day.' What he said was '*Kleea Doy*,' which is Navaho for Bad Horse. *Kleea Doy* —Bad Horse—Bronco Rock. *Sabe?* They buried the stuff right under Bronco Rock."

"You sure of that?"

"I ought to be," assented Devlin. "I fell all over the damned stuff when I had to dive into that crevice. Russian Jack spent twenty years searchin' for it. He never thought to look right above his cabin. Quite a climb, an' that crevice doesn't show from below. Seein' Russian Jack never found it in twenty years, I don't expect Roone to do any better. I figured out from that letter that it was buried under Bronco Rock, so I wasn't too much surprised when I skinned my face on it in that crevice."

He took a fresh bite on his cigarro, while McLean and Tandra gazed speechlessly at him. "I give Roone about a week to scrabble his way through all that broken glass, an' quit," he said reflectively. "Then you an' I'll make a trip with a good wagon an' team from Wickenburg, an' load up. Touch up those horses, will you? Quite a way yet to those White Tanks, an' it seems a long time since I had a drink. Besides, Rico's had plenty time to load up. Yeah, that sounds like him shootin' off his guns right now. Get along, horse!"

THE END.

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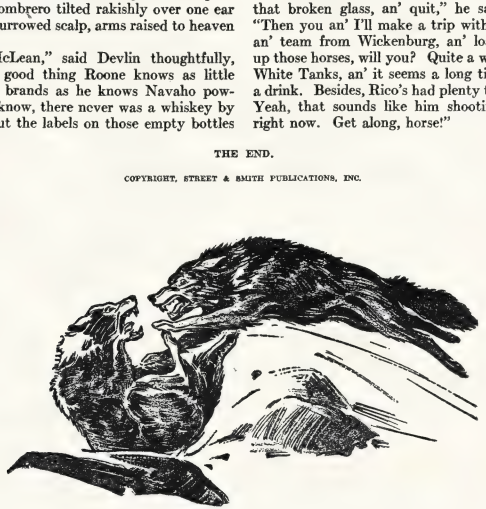


BLIND TRAIL

By Frank Richardson Pierce

The Blue Mountain folks were canny in backing speedy horseflesh—and yet they started a blind racer with the son of a sworn enemy in the saddle

I.

SENATOR JOSIAH HARDY was studying his racing form intently. He was conscious of the fact that a client had entered the office, but he did not bother to look up. A man doping out the seventh race couldn't waste time on clients.

"If you've got a hot tip," a cheerful, impudent voice drawled about five minutes later, "let me in on it, senator."

Senator Hardy nearly broke his neck jerking his head up. "Mike Cotter! My boy! How are you? Why didn't you say something?"

"I started to say something fifteen years ago right in this office," Mike Cotter reminded him, "and my father said, 'Mike, when a gentleman is worried over betting odds, never interrupt his thoughts!' And I never have." The grin had left his face. "If I'd only realized dad was so sick, senator, I'd

have got here on time. Nothing could have stopped me. I've always wanted to tell him I was a damn fool kid, and most of the quarrel was mine."

"Sit down, Mike," Senator Hardy said in a kindly voice. "If you had got here before your dad died, he would have told you he engineered that quarrel that sent you from home fighting mad. He engineered it after consulting me. And it hurt him like hell, but he knew the Cotter breed. And he knew you in particular because you were so like him."

"Do you mean to say I was framed?" Mike asked incredulously, half rising from his chair.

"I guess you could call it that," Hardy admitted.

Mike's face was almost as red as his hair. For a moment it looked as if he might hurl his one hundred and ninety pounds over the desk at the white-haired lawyer. Then he regained a measure of his composure. "Let's have the story," he said briefly.

"It goes back to the feud between the Cotters and Blodgetts," Hardy began.

"Everything does," Mike said bitterly.

"You were the last of the Cotters," the lawyer continued. "The Blodgetts were out to get you. They began hunting you when you were twelve years old. The trouble was you'd never give an inch. You wouldn't keep out of trouble."

"If I'd let them scare me an inch off the trail," Mike pointed out, "I'd have lost my self-respect."

Senator Hardy nodded. "Your father knew your feelings. They were his own. And he realized if he tried to send you away for your own protection, you wouldn't go." Hardy paused, then continued. "We both felt you should have a chance to reach manhood, to learn to defend yourself and acquire sound judgment before facing the Blodgetts. At seventeen, as I said, you wouldn't give an inch. There was only one way to get you out of the country, a quarrel—a serious one. And your father brought it about. He hurt your pride, but he hurt himself more. And because you were proud, you cleared out."

"I see," Mike said reflectively. "Betcha-a-dollar Gorin took my part and dad fired him on the spot. Was that part of the deal, too?"

"Yes, it was," the lawyer admitted. "I've never met Gorin, but your father always said there wasn't a better horse trainer in the West. Your dad believed, too, that any man who could handle horses could handle a growing boy."

Mike smiled faintly. "Gorin always boasted he could tame the wildest horse, the meanest boy and the most difficult women. I'll say this much, senator, he did his best for me. He said he didn't want me going down any blind trail, so he made the blazes and I followed them or took a boot in the pants."

"Your father was a far-sighted man, Mike. He used to say, 'If I can leave a fine boy behind me and a horse good enough to win the Kentucky Derby, I'll feel justified in telling Saint Peter I died a success.' And he died feeling he was a hundred percent successful." Hardy rose. "Come, I'll show you the horse."

The old lawyer led the way down the main street of the little Western cattle town to a pasture some five acres in area. He had bought the tract twenty years ago, against the day when Mesquite Coulee would become a city, and it was still a good pasture.

A black colt, with a fine, proud head and long, slim legs was galloping about the field from the sheer force of his high spirits. A saddle horse, too dignified even to notice the colt's antics, grazed contentedly.

"There he is," Senator Hardy said. "In that horse is a lifetime of breeding, care and study. Your father's lifetime, Mike. In him was bred the hopes of the finest man Western turf has ever known."

"He seems to have everything," Mike admitted. He seemed unable to take his eyes from the colt. "I'll pick up where dad left off. The blue-and-white silks of Blue Mountain Ranch are going to lead the field again." Mike sat on the top rail of the pasture fence, gazing at the colt as his memory reviewed the history of the Cotters. Always daring men, beautiful women and fine horses. Sometimes, it seemed to him, the horses came ahead of the women and men. Silver kings of the West had wagered thousands of dollars on Cotter horses; Cotter horses had won first money at nearly every great track in the country; presidents, governors, senators, judges, millionaires, bums, touts and crooks had bet their money on Cotter horses.

And the Cotters themselves had dined like kings and gone hungry because of the ups and downs of Cotter horses. Cotter women had laughed and cried over Cotter horses. Because of them they had worn diamonds and because of them had pawned them. Rarely indeed did a Cotter doubt the ability of his horse to win, and he backed his faith with his money.

Out in the big house on Blue Mountain Ranch there were oil paintings of Cotters and their horses. Men in gaudy clothing and beaver hats; women who looked down out of their gilt frames with the same high-spirited challenge that had made them breath-takingly beautiful in life.

"How long had dad been sick?" Mike asked after a while. "And why wasn't I notified in time?"

"He wasn't sick at all," answered the senator. "An old friend came to town with a likely-looking nag and wanted to run it against a Blue Mountain horse. Well, your dad didn't have a horse except the colt and his saddle string, so he said he'd run a foot race with his friend for a side bet of five hundred dollars."

"And the fellow took it?"

"Sure. He said he had as much confidence in himself as he did in his horse." The senator looked somber. "I tried to talk your father out of it, but he was all for the race. They ran and your father won. But that night his heart got to acting up, and before morning he was dead."

Mike nodded soberly. "I guess that was the way he wanted to go out—with a warm glow in his eyes because he won his last race. Senator, how're things out at the ranch?"

"Gone to pot," Hardy answered bluntly. "Your father had to sell everything on the place to keep going. It's mortgaged to the limit, too. You see, he spent a couple of small fortunes developing poor horses. Trouble was, he wouldn't touch a horse unless it had the old Cotter strain. He claimed every Blue Mountain horse had champions back of him and blood was bound to tell. It was his idea—and the idea of all the men and women before him—that money spent on race horses wasn't wasted. A winner would pay off mortgages and put the ranch in shape again."

"What's wrong with that theory?" Mike asked sharply.

Senator Hardy grinned. "Bankers and investors don't always hold with it. But for myself, I think it's a fine theory."

"The ranch is mortgaged to the limit, I suppose?" Mike said.

"Yep. I wrote up your father's will two years ago," the senator informed him. "He left you everything and made you executor, without bond. Said he didn't want your hands tied in any way. After checking everything, I find he left you a mortgaged ranch with two years' taxes unpaid, a colt that's as free and clear as the desert air—and the feud with the Blodgetts."

"How do the Blodgetts feel about things now?" asked Mike.

"Like always, they want the mountains and valley to themselves," Senator Hardy answered. "They've sworn never to let up on the Cotters until the last man is wiped out. And you're the last man. But they don't know you're here yet, and chances are you can take the colt out to the ranch without any trouble."

"That's a good idea," agreed Mike, "I wouldn't want anything to happen to the colt. Say, what's his name?"

"Your dad claimed he never could find a name good enough," the senator answered. "He got a letter not long ago from Gorin saying that you could take care of yourself. He planned to send for you soon and he expected you'd help him name the colt." Hardy began climbing off the fence. "Say, where is Gorin, anyway?"

"Coming by slow freight, I guess," Mike replied. "When we got your telegram funds were low. I took every dollar we had and bought a ticket. Gorin said he'd ride the rods."

The next morning Mike and the senator went to the courthouse and completed the details of the transfer of the estate. Cash consisted of the five hundred dollars his father had won in the foot race that proved his death. The remainder of the bank account had gone for funeral expenses.

As Mike came out of the courthouse, Windy Bill Jarvis, an old fellow he remembered from boyhood, stared with lively interest. "Mike Cotter!" he exclaimed. "When did you get back? You look as though you did a heap of growin' up. God help the Blodgetts! You'll make short work of 'em."

A boy moving indolently along on the opposite side of the street heard Windy's words. He jerked into action as though stung by a hornet. "Who's that big feller with the red hair?" he asked a man who was also watching Mike and Windy Bill.

"Him? Oh, that's Mike Cotter. Some folks used to call him Torchy Cotter when he was a kid around here," the man answered. A moment later he watched the kid vanish around the nearest corner. "Now what in thunder got into him? Who is he, anyway?"

"Some mountain kid they call Shanks," another pedestrian answered.

Mike Cotter, absorbed in his conversation with Windy Bill, did not notice the boy.

"Now get this, Jarvis," he said heatedly, "I didn't come back here to start any feud. Nobody's going to step on me, understand, but I'm not going gunning for Blodgetts. Just remember that." He strode off, leaving the oldster gaping.

That afternoon, Senator Hardy gave Mike a few personal belongings his father had left: a pair of .44 six-guns, a Winchester rifle, a pair of binoculars and a heavy silver stop watch. There were a few good-luck charms the elder Cotter had deemed potent on critical occasions. The first was a rabbit's foot, the second a tiny horseshoe he carried in his hip pocket and the third a ring made from a horseshoe nail.

"You can keep these three things," Mike said. "I won't be needing them until the colt starts running. And if he turns out the way I think he will, they won't be needed even then."

II.

In the four years Mike Cotter had been away from home, he had wandered all the way from Point Barrow to Central America. His adventures had not left a feeling of restlessness. Rather, they made him appreciate the home range all the more.

With easy competence he roped the best saddle horse in the senator's pasture at dawn the following morning. He was traveling light, for he had arrived with almost nothing. He topped off the horse, proved himself master, then haltered the colt. The spirited little animal kicked, snorted and rolled his eyes, but there was a roguish gleam in their

depths. Mike had a way with horses and the colt instinctively sensed it.

He stopped briefly at the senator's house to say good-by. "If Gorin's broke when he arrives, loan him some money, please," he requested.

"Sure," the senator agreed with a grin. "He's bound to be broke, isn't he? Didn't he give you every cent he had?"

"Yes, but you don't know Gorin. If he sees a race in progress along the way, he'll roll off the freight train, size up the horses, tout winners, collect a few dollars, then put it all on the nose of a long shot," Mike explained. "He may come in on the cushions."

"I'll take care of him," the senator promised.

Mike Cotter breathed deeply of the crisp range air as he rode along, leading the colt. This high country air was the finest in the world for horses, and for men, too. Because of the colt, he made no attempt to cover much ground, being content to jog along. He should arrive at the ranch some time later that afternoon or evening.

Shortly after the noon stop he rode through a narrow pass and caught a glimpse of the country beyond. The Blue Mountains which had given the ranch its name lay, as usual, bathed in a deep-blue haze. They hadn't changed in a thousand years, let alone the four he had been absent.

At their feet lay the rich valley comprising the Cotter range. Then there was a band of timber, and above that the slopes were either rocky and green or covered with snow, depending on the season. The deeper gulches amid the higher peaks were rarely without a covering of snow. It was a land of enchanting beauty to Mike, even when he recalled that the Blodgetts ran small bands of cattle and sheep in the timber, mountain valleys and higher slopes.

There had been a time many years ago when a Cotter had said to a Blodgett, "There's room enough for both of us. I'll range to timber line and you can take the rest. If you grow too big, you can trickle through the mountain passes to the badlands beyond. Plenty of range there."

The two families had lived in peace until a Blodgett horse lost a race to a Cotter horse down in Mesquite Coulee and a Blodgett had welshed on a bet. That night there had been words that had been lost in a sudden, brief crackle of gunfire. When the smoke cleared away, the Cotter and Blodgett who had made the bet lay dead, and beside them four of their kin.

After that a continuing feud had thinned the ranks of each faction, but from the beginning there had been more Blodgetts, and there were fifteen or twenty now, against one Cotter.

The narrow, winding road skirting Cotter valley land and Blodgett mountain land was neutral ground. A sheriff, ten years back, had called the factions together and spoken sternly to them.

"I can't stop you killin' each other, though if ever I get the evidence I'll hang somebody for murder," he warned, "but if there's any more shootin' on the county highway, I'll haul both tribes in and charge the lot of you with murder. That's neutral ground."

And because it was neutral ground and Mike Cotter was returning home and saw a welcome in each old tree and tumbling waterfall, he was completely relaxed. The colt was abreast the saddle horse and at times his sleek, velvet-coat rubbed against Mike's leg. He seemed to like the human contact. Suddenly it gave a snort at a stirring of the brush.

"What's the matter with you?" Mike called soothingly. "There's nothing—" Then he saw with one swift, comprehensive glance the muzzle of a shotgun protruding from a thicket where the road curved.

Mike went for his gun and his draw was as swift and smooth as that country had ever seen. But even as the six-gun left the holster, flame belched from the shotgun and searing hail struck him. He fell from the saddle just in time, for his mount crashed to the ground, as a bullet went through its skull.

Mike felt his muscles jerk violently from the impact of the lead. He heard the colt's scream, and even at that critical moment the agony in the little fellow's scream knifed through him.

Then Mike was conscious of a roaring in his head, and when he opened his eyes the world was in shadows. Fighting instinct lifted his stricken body until one hand supported it. The other groped feebly for his second gun. In the distance he heard a boyish voice urge, "Give 'im the other barrel, pop."

"He's a dead coyote right now," a man's voice answered.

The shadows cleared and everything grew sharp and distinct—the trees, the sky, the fields. He saw the colt running wildly. It struck a tree and fell flat. It got up again and ran straight into the nearest thicket. Again it fell. A man's voice screamed, "You blinded that colt!"

It sounded like his own voice. The bitter cursing came from his own lips. He realized that now. But what was wrong with his left arm? Why wouldn't it respond to his will, draw and fire a gun? He could shoot as well with his left hand as his right.

Somehow Mike got to his feet, intent only on revenging the colt. "You blasted Blodgett coyotes!" he panted. "Skunks! Dry-gulchers. Yellowbelly welshers."

Lafe Blodgett's triumphant face danced before him. Lafe knew Mike Cotter couldn't draw that gun; couldn't drag his aching body within ten yards of him and his wide-eyed son.

"Blinded that colt!" Mike choked, and fell headlong in the dust.

"Feud busted into flames again," Lafe Blodgett

grunted with satisfaction, "and we dumped a bucket o' water on it."

"Hadn't you better finish the colt, dad?" the boy asked. "The critter can't see a thing."

"Let the colt die. No need to waste any more lead on it," Lafe Blodgett declared. "He'll bust his haid wide open pronto. Now we'll go, the way we come." He led the way to a creek and waded it for a half mile. Then, grasping an overhanging limb, he gained the bank without making a track in the damp sand. The boy followed his father's example.

"Sheriff'll have his idears who shot Mike Cotter, but he can't prove nothin'," Lafe said. "Never can prove nothin' 'less you talk."

"I'll never open my mouth," the boy promised.

A half-hour later father and son stood on a ridge and looked down on the dusty road. Mike Cotter hadn't stirred. "Deader'n a door nail," Lafe grunted. "Colt's dyin' slower. Still runnin' over the flat. Ain't busted its neck yet." The pair turned and vanished into the haze of the Blue Mountains.

Mike Cotter had a faint idea he was lying in the dust, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. When he tried to move there was no muscular response. He made an effort to remember what had happened to him.

"I was riding along with the colt," he thought. "Then something ripped into me and I fell off the horse. The colt—" He gave up that trend of thought. It was getting him nowhere. The effort even to attempt to recall things was too much.

Presently he grew conscious of a steady pounding. He knew what that was—a horse coming at a gallop. The horse stopped and he heard, faintly, Senator Hardy's voice groan, "I'm too late. The Blodgetts got him." Hardy's fingers felt his pulse.

Mike tried to tell him to do something for the colt, but his lips refused to form the words. What was the matter with the senator, he thought, that he hadn't noticed the colt's absence? Didn't he know this was the Blue Mountain Ranch's last gesture toward survival; the last card?

Vaguely he felt the senator's fingers moving about his body. He supposed that Hardy was trying to stop the flow of blood. A little later Mike slipped into blackness again, and when he emerged the stars were shining and he was on a cot lashed to a buckboard.

"Go easy," the senator was saying, "no telling how bad he's shot up inside. Damn this rough road." The driver slowed down.

"The colt!" Mike's lips and lungs went through the motions of shouting, but the words came out as a whisper.

Later, Mike emerged from semiconsciousness and realized the sun was shining and men were carrying the cot into the Mesquite Coulee hospital. He must have passed out again because when he next realized what was transpiring he was on an operating table. "Senator!" he whispered. *"Senator!"*

"He's conscious," the doctor said. "Come here, senator."

"Well, my boy," Senator Hardy said with a lightness he did not feel, "I'm glad you're coming out of it. We'll have you on your feet in a couple of days."

"Senator!" Mike whispered, summoning all of his reserve strength. "Find that colt!" Then he collapsed.

The senator left the operating room at the doctor's request and began pacing the hall. He wished he knew where to reach Betcha-a-dollar Gorin. If anyone could help Mike, the man who had been the kid's constant companion for four years was the one. Well, there was nothing to be done about Gorin but hope he would show up.

Presently the sheriff joined Senator Hardy. "What do you know about this, senator?" the lawman asked.

"Nothing that can be called evidence," Senator Hardy answered. "Briefly, this is what happened: Mike Cotter arrived in town to take over his father's estate. Apparently young Ace Blodgett was in town and heard about it. The kid lit out for home like a bat out of hell. Someone saw him and mentioned it to me."

"Made a beeline for his old man, eh?" the sheriff observed.

"Like as not. I didn't hear about it until yesterday morning," the senator continued. "By that time, Mike had a big start. I saddled, ordered a buckboard to follow just in case something had happened, and tried to catch Mike. I was too late, but the Cotters are a tough breed."

"Do you suppose Mike saw the man who shot him?" the sheriff asked.

"Like as not," Hardy answered, "but you won't get him to testify in court against Blodgett. You know that, sheriff,"

"Yes, I know," the sheriff admitted gloomily. "Feuds are queer things. Damn fool things, too. But there're plenty of crazy things folks go in for that the law can't do anything about."

"You can do me a favor, sheriff," Senator Hardy said. "Take a posse and see if you can find that colt. I don't think the Blodgetts would be fool enough to take him, but you might look in their country, too. Potentially he's the greatest horse the Cotters ever bred and that's takin' in a mighty lot of territory."

"I'll send some of the boys out," the sheriff promised. "Do you suppose he's wounded?"

"Don't see how he can help but be," the senator answered. "The way that buckshot was patterning when it hit Mike it was bound to take in the colt."

"Well, I'll go get a posse started after that colt," the sheriff replied. He departed, muttering to himself. Although he was a man who never played

favorites in his enforcement of the law, he had great admiration for the Cotters and the utmost contempt for the Blodgetts. Most of them were lazy and not only believed the world owed them a living, but that someone should collect it for them. "Natural-born dry-gulchers," he called them and that covered everything. The range could brand the tribe with no stronger indictment.

III.

After a wait that seemed endless, Mike Cotter was wheeled past the worried senator. Mike looked as if he had died on the operating table, but the senator knew that if this had happened his face would have been covered with a sheet.

He stood in the doorway and watched them transfer the unconscious man to the bed, then began pacing the floor again. He heard a disturbance downstairs but paid no attention to it until an unshaven man, with the dust of the roadbed on him came up the stairs. A protesting nurse was clinging to his arm.

"You can't go up there," she insisted.

"Betcha a dollar I can," the stranger said gently, but with a world of firmness in his voice.

"Are you Betcha-a-dollar Gorin?" the senator asked.

He nodded.

"Yep! And you must be Senator Hardy that Mike used to talk about. What's this about Mike?" Gorin demanded. "Just as I rolled off the freight I heard the feud had started again, and Mike was in the hospital. I came on the run. Is he bad, senator?" He did not wait for an answer. "Yeah, he's bad. I can tell by your face."

Gorin was a thin, wiry man with gray hair. The stubble on his face was almost white. Friendly but very shrewd blue eyes peered from bushy brows. His face worked convulsively for a moment, then it set. "Wouldn't do for him to know I'm scared," he declared. "He thinks I never was scared in my life."

Gorin braced up with an effort. "The kid's like a son to me," he said. Then he entered the room. In a few moments he came out. "Guess I'd better spruce up and look like somethin'," he told the senator. "Like as not I'll have to talk like a Dutch uncle to get him out of the idear of dyin'. He whispered somethin' just now about losin' the colt. Ain't lost it, has he?"

Senator Hardy sketched an outline of what had happened, adding that members of the posse had brought in reports of a blind colt running wild.

"Then we've got to find that colt," Gorin said promptly. "Senator, you stick close to his bed. If he asks, tell him you heard from me and that I'm taking care of things."

"You should be back in a couple of days," the senator predicted. "The colt can't have gone far. If it's dead, the buzzards will be wheeling over the corpse."

"And if he's alive, he should be pretty close to the road," Gorin added. "A blind critter can't travel far. Trouble is, dust and sand are blowin' and trackin's goin' to be hard."

The senator didn't have a form sheet handy, but he had a lot of facts and figures in his head that never were on form sheets. "I haven't picked a winner—a real money horse—in years," he said solemnly. "I think I'll back Mike Cotter, Betcha-a-dollar Gorin and that colt. They'll never need backing more than they do right now." He put his hand in his pocket and held out a roll of bills. "Here's some expense money. Get what you need and take anything I've got in the way of horseflesh."

"A little money will help some," Gorin admitted.

"Usually I can make a few honest dollars as I go along, betting, but nobody had any money this time, seemed like."

Gorin lost no time in carrying his pack to Senator Hardy's barn, where he washed, shaved and shifted into clean clothing. An hour later he had cut a likely little horse from the senator's saddle string and was heading for the Blue Mountains.

In his service with Mike's father, Gorin had covered every square mile of country in this region, excepting only Blodgett territory. The elder Cotter had given strict orders his men were not only to keep off Blodgett range land, but were to take no part in the feud.

Gorin camped that night within a hundred yards of where Mike had been shot from his horse. As he sat by the campfire he knew Blodgett eyes were watching him. The owlhoot he heard and its answer were nearly perfect, but they didn't deceive Gorin.

"Betcha a dollar them's Blodgetts," he muttered to himself. "Betcha a dollar they won't bother me. They'll figger I'm some puncher driftin' through the country."

If a showdown presented itself, Gorin planned to get in some good work while the Blodgetts were

recovering from the surprise of learning that he was a Cotter in everything but name and blood.

Gorin slept like a top and was on his way as soon as it was daylight. He found dark splotches on grass and brush, and an occasional hoofprint close to the road. He knew the report that the colt was wounded and blind was true. No animal with vision would crash through thickets and knock bark from trees with its head. He even found tufts of black hair caught in brush splinters.

The trail led to open country where there were stretches of sand and grass, but no large trees and thickets. Gorin wasn't one to waste his strength. He rode to the top of a small mountain, climbed to a pinnacle rock, adjusted a pair of binoculars and commenced to study the lower country with methodical thoroughness.

He divided the land into imaginary squares, then examined each square. He looked for buzzards first, then for coyotes that might be stalking the half-dead colt, and he watched for the colt itself, knowing it would probably be a huddled black object on the edge of some thicket.

He saw life—stray cattle; several members of the posse the sheriff had sent to look for the colt, and a dozen deer. He looked speculatively at the Blue Mountains. A blind animal might work deep into the wooded canyons, or even break through one of the passes to Cameron Hole and the badlands. But it was hardly possible.

He rode to another commanding ridge two miles nearer the Blue Mountains, yet not in Blodgett territory, and made a camp. He didn't light a fire because there was no need of inviting trouble. A campfire on the country highway was one thing; a fire in the mountains was something else.

Again he slept soundly. And again he was awake at dawn, perching like some half-frozen bird on the rimrock, watching the lower country, and the air. Perhaps the buzzards would gather today. But the air remained clear and the wild animals in the meadows gave no hint of anything out of the way.

Gorin was reluctant to give up his search. He knew there must be an answer. He held there was an answer to everything. Slowly moving the binoculars, he suddenly saw a brush movement on a ridge a half mile distant. The canyon between was dense with small trees and grass. There was a spring at the bottom. With its water and grass it was the kind of place to draw a colt. Gorin watched the movement closely.

"Whatever it is, is movin' mighty slow," he murmured. Then the brush no longer stirred. "Critter's stopped. There, the brush is stirrin' some more! Hell, I've lost it again."

Several minutes elapsed. Then Gorin saw a leafy branch bend down. Some intervening branches prevented a clear view. Suddenly a branch snapped cleanly and Gorin caught a glimpse of a human head and shoulders and a rifle resting on a limb. He hurled himself backward, and a droning bullet passed within inches of his shoulder before he even struck the ground.

Gorin never did know whether the shot was wild, or whether, between the moment the bullet clipped a twig and its arrival, he had thrown his body clear. He only knew he had never moved faster in his life, and that he was untouched.

"Damned Blodgetts," he growled. "They're handin' me their callin' cards now." He began crawling through the brush toward the feudist. "Betcha a dollar I'll hand 'em one of my callin' cards before the day's over!"

He crossed the canyon without the slightest sound or stirring of a branch. He didn't expose himself once to possible watchful eyes on the ridge. Crouched in a thicket, he studied the ridge for the best way to gain the crest unobserved. A loose stone rolled down a steep slope and plunged into a bush. He crouched, his thin hands gripping his rifle so steadily it might have rested on a rock.

A minute later a barefooted, ragged youth slid into view, carrying a long-barreled rifle in his skinny hands. His face was flushed and his small eyes were blazing with a light that, in a child's eyes, was weird and terrible.

"I got me a Cotter man," he whimpered in his excitement. "I got me a Cotter man. Dad'll be right proud o' me. I got me a Cotter man!"

"Betcha a dollar you didn't," said Gorin.

The boy stopped dead in his tracks. Animal furtiveness drove out the other light in his eyes. Then, realizing Gorin's rifle was covering him, he dropped his own weapon. Gorin had put the kid's age at twelve. Now, on closer inspection, he decided lack of proper care had retarded the boy's growth. He might be as old as seventeen.

"You're Ace Blodgett!" he said, making a guess.

"Yeah," the boy admitted. His wild-eyed look suggested that he was trying to escape the trap his excitement had led him into. "You're a Cotter man."

"Pretty near," Gorin answered. "You tried to dry-gulch me and that makes me a hundred percent Cotter man now. Killin' you ain't goin' to be pleasant. But that's what you've got to expect when you feud."

The boy turned pale, but he did not cringe. Gorin understood boys better than most men do.

"I've got to kill you," he said reasonably, "because if I don't, you'll kill me."

"I'll give you my word—" the boy began eagerly.

"A blodgett's word ain't worth a hoot in hell, Ace," Gorin interrupted. "You know that. That's why I've got to kill you. Tomorrow or maybe next day, some of your kin will find your body," he continued. "They'll pack it home, nail up a pine box and put you in it. They'll sing psalms and pray. Your mother and sisters will cry and they'll ask theirselves why it had to happen. They'll say it's

senseless—and it is. But that won't bring you back."

The boy's eyes remained riveted to Gorin's face, but his white lips did not move.

"Then they'll lower you into the cold ground and the clods will rattle on your coffin lid, Ace, and they'll put up a board with your name on it," Gorin grimly continued. "And after that, you'll be a memory. How old are you?"

"Eighteen next summer," Ace Blodgett answered.

"Pretty young to die," said Gorin. His finger touched the trigger. "You can shut your eyes if you want to."

"I'll keep 'em open," Ace answered.

The rifle roared and the boy dropped. "Pretty stiff medicine," Gorin muttered, "but this is a tough situation." He carried the limp figure down to the spring, filled his hat full of cold water and dashed it into Ace's face. The boy's eyes opened and he looked about, startled.

"You . . . you didn't—" he began thickly.

"I shot above you, Ace," said Gorin. "I wanted you to understand what a tough business this feudin' is. You won't believe it, but Mike Cotter wouldn't have killed you, either. If you'd have been a whimpering rat, I'd have kicked hell out of you, called myself a fool, and then hoped to dodge your next bullet. But you're a brave kid."

He saw a glow of pride come into the boy's eyes, perhaps the first feeling of real pride Ace Blodgett had ever known. "I won't expect you to shoot me without warning in the future. I— What's that racket on the ridge?" Gorin swung his rifle toward the sound.

A thin, gaunt woman astride a mule rode into view. "Ace," she screamed, "what've you done? Ace! Where are yuh?"

"Ma," Ace explained to Gorin, then he bellowed, "I'm down here."

The woman's face was ashen and color only returned when she was satisfied her boy was not wounded. "I heard yore rifle, Ace," she explained. "Then I heard a strange gun and I just knowed you'd started feudin' and got yourself killed."

The boy told her what had happened and the woman gazed at Gorin in amazement. She couldn't understand a Cotter man who did not exact his revenge. "He's only a runt," she said, "but he can kill. I begged my man not to take the young un along when he went gunnin' fer Mike Cotter, but—"

"Ma! Now you've told it!" Ace burst out.

"I'd tell it," the woman panted. "I'd tell it to the judge. I'd see my old man hung, if it'd save my boys' lives. Me and the women afore me brung children into the world. We've loved 'em. Then their paps took 'em feudin' and brung 'em home daid on mule back. And now, it's commenced ag'in." She began to cry.

Ace made no attempt to comfort his mother. In his code that would be unmanly, a sign of weakness. Besides, womenfolks were supposed to do a certain amount of blubbering.

"How did you happen to be here today?" Gorin inquired curiously.

"Dad's buckshot blinded the colt," Ace confessed after some hesitation, "and I figgered to put it out o' its mis'ry. I'm kind o' soft about horses." He seemed ashamed of this trait in his character. "Used to sneak down and look at the Cotter critters when I was a little cuss. Thet's how I come to know who you was today. Could tell by the way you rode. And I knowed you was gunnin' for a Blodgett."

"No, I was lookin' for the colt, Ace," Gorin explained. "Mrs. Blodgett, you tell Lafe it's time he forgot the feud. With the Blodgetts and Cotters living in peace, Blue Mountain Ranch could come back again. It would be one of the biggest horse-raisin' regions in the West."

"Flat country feller named Atwood come up here six months ago," Mrs. Blodgett said, won over by Gorin's courteous manner. "He offered to buy our range ifn we'd git rid of the Cotters. Lafe said he'd manage that."

"And that was right down Lafe's street, eh?" Gorin suggested.

"Lafe said as soon as he'd got shed o' the Cotters he'd start raisin' racin' stock hisself," the woman admitted. "Since then seems like Atwood's kind o' been eggin' Lafe on."

"So Atwood starts trouble as soon as the Cotters develop a colt that looks like it might cut in on the big money, eh?" Gorin said softly.

Bert Atwood was a breeder who had tried to get control of the Blue Mountain breed for years. He wanted to own the name and the blue and white colors. It would lend his own horses prestige and give him a chance to boost his prices. "And that'd be just like putting cheap cigars in a box carryin' an expensive label," Gorin had often told Mike. In all the years of breeding, the Cotters had never sold a poor horse under the Blue Mountain brand.

"Mike Cotter, if he lives, will listen to reason. He's willin' to forget this feud," Gorin told Mrs. Blodgett. "Lafe began hunting him when he was a boy. That's why Mike's father sent him away with me—to give the boy a chance to at least grow up. Lafe caught him off guard on his return. But if Mike lives, and the feud goes on, he'll kill a pile of Blodgetts before he's killed hisself. I know what I'm talkin' about because I trained Mike Cotter. I trained him because I want him to live and raise good horseflesh. But Lafe wants it different, Mrs. Blodgett. And I'm right sorry. You've got a fine, brave boy in Ace. It's too bad he'll have to go the way of the others just because his old man is bull-headed."

And with that, he handed Ace's rifle back to him, tipped his hat to Mrs. Blodgett and climbed back up the ridge to his horse. At the crest he paused,

cupped his hands and bellowed down at Ace. "If you find that black colt, let me know. There's things me an' you an' Mike Cotter's got in common, Ace; we love fine horses."

IV.

Although he had failed to locate the colt or its remains, Betcha-a-dollar Gorin did not feel the trip into the Blue Mountain country was wasted. He had detected courage and potential fairness in Ace Blodgett and that in itself was something. It was a desperately thin thread on which to base hopes for the future, but it was a thread, nevertheless, and Gorin wasn't one to overlook any hope.

He rode the remainder of the afternoon and most of the night in an effort to arrive at the hospital as soon as possible. He arrived to find Senator Hardy pacing the hall and frequently mopping his face. Gorin looked at his watch and noticed it was three a. m.

"Glad you're back, Gorin," Hardy said. "You didn't find the colt, of course. I can tell by your face. It looks as if it wouldn't make any difference to Mike whether he was found or not. Doc's just about given up hope."

"If he dies I'm going to swear out a warrant," Gorin said bleakly. "Ace Blodgett admitted his father did the shooting. His wife knows about it, too."

"You can't make a wife testify against her husband," the senator objected.

"I'd be the last man to ask it," said Gorin. "But Mrs. Blodgett may insist on testifying if she thinks she can stop the feud and save the lives of her remaining sons. She's buried two already. She's got daughters who'll marry, and their children might be fed to the feud. Mrs. Blodgett is looking a long way ahead."

"She isn't the only one," the senator said. "Take a look at the special nurse when you go into Mike's room. See if you haven't seen her somewhere before."

Gorin walked softly into the room and looked down at Mike's face. The dying man didn't seem to be breathing. If there was only some way of helping him to take several deep breaths, Gorin thought, it might help. He looked a long time at Mike, then at the nurse. She was as lovely a girl as he had seen anywhere. Her hair was black and she had flashing black eyes and a certain proud set of her head that made Gorin think of a thoroughbred filly.

Her face was grave, now, with a certain desperation about it. Sometimes she clenched her hands as if by sheer, physical effort she could hold life in Mike. He was sure he had seen the girl somewhere, but he couldn't recall the time or place. And that was strange, he thought, because a girl like that should leave an impact on any man.

"Who is she?" he asked when he rejoined the senator.

"Dorothy Blodgett," Hardy answered.

Gorin looked surprised. "It's hard to believe that hollow-eyed, gaunt scarecrow of a woman can be this girl's mother."

"Mrs. Blodgett was beautiful as a girl," Hardy told him. "But feuds, funerals and fetchin' wore her down, made her like the rest of the Blodgett women. But a spark of rebellion remained. She made Dorothy go to school, then sent her down to learn nursing so she could come back and do something for her own kin. The girl's turned out to be one of the best. When she heard Mike was dying she was afraid her father might swing for murder, so she came up and brought a specialist along. He operated yesterday afternoon."

"Another operation," Gorin protested. "How did Mike stand it?"

"It had to be done," the senator explained. "One of the buckshot was raising hell. Pushing against some nerve affecting the heart."

The two men sat out the night on a bench in the corridor, smoking. A puff or two on a cigarette was all Gorin could stand and the senator's pipe kept going out.

Morning came after an eternity. Mike was still alive, but when Dorothy Blodgett's relief came she refused to leave the room, insisted that she might be able to do something.

Gorin finally fell asleep sitting on the bench. He had had a long hard ride in the last forty-eight hours and the pace was almost more than even his wiry frame could stand.

Hardy's excited voice awakened him. "Mike opened his eyes and looked around, then closed 'em again," he cried. "Better come."

Gorin limped down the hall, cursing softly because his legs were stiff from sitting. A new, competent-looking doctor was there. Dorothy Blodgett still stood near the head of the bed. Gorin seated himself on the opposite side. He waited a good hour before Mike's eyelids flickered. It was the signal for him to jump to his feet and bend down, his grizzled face close.

The eyes opened, stared hard as if things were out of focus. Then recognition came. "Betcha!" Mike whispered. "You'll find . . . the colt."

"Damned right, we'll find the colt," Gorin answered. When he came out of the room, he was swallowing hard. "Betcha a dollar he gets well, senator."

"That's a bet I won't take," Hardy answered, "because I'd be on the wrong side."

It was a bright moment for Betcha-a-dollar Gorin when Mike recognized him. But there were dark moments in the days that followed. It was a long, hard fight before Mike Cotter began to show steady improvement.

Dorothy Blodgett remained on the job, seemingly tireless. She was taking no chances. She came into

the room one morning to find Gorin concluding a long story. "We didn't tell you before," Gorin was saying to Mike, "for two reasons. First because you weren't strong enough to hear a lot of talkin', and because we've hoped right along we'd find the colt."

"And you didn't find his bones?" Mike asked.

"No. We didn't. We've looked in plenty of thickets, but naturally we couldn't check on all of 'em," Gorin told him. "I'll be driftin' now. Figger to go up to the ranch and get the house ready for you when you're able to travel. Altitude's higher. A high altitude produces the best horses and best men"—his glance rested on Dorothy—"and the best girls, too, seems like."

"I'll pull out of here as soon as they'll let me," Mike promised. He watched the old-timer disappear through the door, then shifted his interest to the girl.

"Hell of a world, isn't it?" he said wryly. "A man spends his lifetime breeding a certain type of running horse. Into the colt goes all of his own experience and that of others. Then—*pow*—the colt's done for. The sire and mare are dead, so we can't get another."

"I hate horses," Dorothy Blodgett said passionately, "and everything connected with them. They've brought generations of Cotters and Blodgetts nothing but death and misery."

Mike couldn't help but recall that a Blodgett's welshing on a horse-race wager had started it all. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

"And you're right," the girl continued. "It is a hell of a world. I saw my father this morning. He said I was wasting my time here, that I was building you up so he would have to do the job over again. Either that, or I was bringing life back to a man who would kill my kin."

"Perhaps," Mike suggested, "your profession has made you forget the barriers that stand between your family and mine."

The girl's eyes had a visionary glow. "I've promised to preserve life and devote my own life to its preservation," she murmured. Then she paused and stared down at him. "Mike Cotter," she said abruptly, "will you do something for me?"

"What?" he asked, although he knew what was coming.

"Will you leave the country and give yourself and my younger brothers a chance to live?" she pleaded.

"I was sent away for that reason," Mike answered. "Now I'm back, to carry out the job my dad left me of building Blue Mountain horses back to their old glory. No, I won't leave again. Make your men leave me alone and I won't bother them."

Their eyes met and clashed, and utter weariness filled hers. Mike took her hand and clasped it tightly. "You're fine and brave," he said earnestly. "All the Blodgett and Cotter women deserved a better break than they got. We men are the ones who made a mess of things."

Dorothy let her hand linger in his for a moment, then drew it away. "Well, whoever made the mess," she said hopelessly, "it looks as though it will never be straightened out while there is a Blodgett and a Cotter left to hate each other."

The day after Mike was wheeled over Mesquite Coulee's board sidewalks for the first time, Lafe Blodgett and nine of his male kin rode into town. They were heavily armed and they stopped at the general store and bought ammunition.

A few minutes later the sheriff sent two deputies to the hospital. They carried six-guns, rifles and sawed-off shotguns. "If them Blodgetts start anything," a deputy said, "we're fixed to get 'em comin', goin' and a long way off."

Gorin joined the deputies, ready for anything. "They won't attack the hospital," Dorothy said confidently. "They aren't that crazy. But pap's playing safe."

Nevertheless, she watched anxiously from a second-floor window.

Presently the sheriff, his thumbs tucked in his holster belts and within easy reach of his six-guns, sauntered across the street. "Howdy, Lafe," he said, "got a warrant here for your arrest. You're charged with assault with intent to kill. Skippin' the whereas and what not in the warrant, the injured party is one Mike Cotter."

"Who says I shot Mike Cotter?" demanded Lafe. "Mike?"

"Mike ain't said a word," the sheriff answered. "When the time comes we'll have the witnesses to testify." The sheriff waited a moment. "Well, are you comin' along, or do you aim to start a rumpus? Might say we're prepared for a rumpus, not knowin' your intentions when you first showed up."

Insolently confident of his ultimate release, Lafe Blodgett slowly dismounted. "I'm pleadin' not guilty," he said. "I ain't sayin' the feud has busted out again. But if it does, sheriff, keep your nose out of it."

"Maybe somebody pelted Mike with a pea-shooter," the sheriff suggested. "But if they did, we'll have to pass a law makin' pea-shooters deadly weapons."

"I'll get me bail money, boys," Lafe told his companions, "and'll be home in a day or so. Meantime, I'll eat vittals on the county."

The sheriff escorted Blodgett to the jail, locked him up, then went out and got the prisoner a lawyer. The other Blodgetts, including Ace, who had said nothing throughout the incident, left town that evening.

The sheriff called in Gorin for a talk. "Senator Hardy's the best lawyer in town," he said, "but Blodgett didn't hire him on account of him and Mike bein' friends, so he took Judge Conrade. Con-

rade charges big fees an' he ain't one to take a case unless he knows he's goin' to be paid. What I'm wondering is where's Lafe gettin' the money."

"From a crooked turfman named Bert Atwood, like as not," Gorin answered. "But what kind of a case you got, sheriff? Mike won't testify. You know that."

"Mike's goin' on the witness stand whether he likes it or not," the sheriff declared. "And if he fergets—or can't remember—we'll put on somebody who'll tell enough to send Blodgett to the pen."

"Who?"

"Don't let it leak out," the sheriff warned, "but

The colt snorted nervously, and Mike, caught off guard, didn't get the idea at once.

Mrs. Blodgett is goin' to testify." He watched Gorin's reaction. "Now don't that knock you offn the Christmas tree?"

"No," Gorin answered. "It don't. The poor critter is tryin' to put an end to this feudin' and save her boys' lives. And it's goin' to get her in one hell of a mess."

"The doctor says Mike can leave the hospital next Friday," the sheriff continued. "So bright and early Friday mornin' I'll be on hand with a posse to escort Mike to his ranch."

"Mike won't like that," Gorin predicted. "He won't like it a little bit."

And Mike didn't like it! When Friday came and he saw the preparations for his safe conduct he flatly refused to have any part of it. "Betcha and I'll drive out alone," he said. "We can take care of ourselves. You can't force us to accept an armed escort."

"Oh, can't I?" the sheriff demanded. "You're an important State's witness in a trial. It's my duty to see that nothin' happens to you. I can lock you up for safe-keepin' if I want to. Ain't that so, senator?"

"I'm afraid it is," the senator answered, and he looked happy about the whole thing.

Bundled up in blankets, Mike was placed in a well-cushioned buckboard which Gorin was to drive. Six deputy sheriffs ranged alongside.

"Dorothy!" Mike shouted to the girl who was helping to get him comfortably fixed. "I call you to witness I'm agreeing to this under protest. I'm not afraid to travel alone."

A weary smile was the girl's only answer. She was remaining at the hospital until after her father's trial.

They took two days to make the trip to Mike's ranch, stopping overnight at a small spread whose owner parted his hair in the middle in order to maintain strict neutrality between the Blodgetts and Cotters.

The following afternoon the buckboard drove through a poplar-bordered lane to the big house. Gorin had aired out the place and made it livable while Mike was regaining his strength. An old Chinese was installed as cook and housekeeper. Old-time Cotter buckaroos, sensing a return to better days, had moved into the bunkhouse. A small bunch of cattle and a band of horses, nearly wild from lack of human contact, grazed on the range.

The fences were in fair shape, Mike noticed, but the house and the barns needed overhauling and paint. The machinery, though housed and greased against rust, needed repairs. He could spend several thousand dollars within two hundred yards of the house itself.

Things within the house were unchanged. The same family portraits looked down from the walls, and while the moths had worked on the piano's

felt-covered hammers, the solid, hard-wood furniture was good for another sixty years.

In his own room Mike found his first shotgun and rifle hanging on the wall, light weapons, because Cotter children were trained early in the use of firearms. In a gun cabinet stood the old ten-gauge double-barreled gun, with its brass shells for reloading. Mike smiled faintly. When he graduated to this cannon with its mighty kick at the ripe age of twelve, he had considered himself a man, indeed.

The business of convalescence consisted of short walks about the place each day, with a little pretense at working. Later this was extended to rides on gentle horses and work which did not demand too much strength. Then, almost before Mike realized it, the sheriff sent a posse out to escort him to town for Blodgett's trial.

Mike had regained most of his lost weight in the eight weeks spent at the ranch, and he was physically fit, but he knew he was soft. Almost anyone could have beaten him in a rough-and-tumble fight and a hard day in the saddle would have left him exhausted. Again he roared his head off because of the escort, but again his protest was futile. The members of the posse grinned and called themselves Cotter's wet nurses, which didn't improve Mike's disposition.

V.

The day before the trial the sheriff called the various factions into the courtroom. The Blodgetts had arrived on horseback and in buckboards. There were thirty-five or forty of them in town, including the women and children.

"I ain't goin' to collect your guns," the sheriff told them, "because you'd only get some more. But if any man wears a gun into the courtroom, he'll do a long stretch in jail. And I ain't foolin'. If any Blodgett or Cotter gets drunk, he'll do a stretch. This is goin' to be a peaceful and orderly trial even if I have to shoot a lot of folks full of holes to make it thataway. That's all."

The Blodgetts filed out. Ace was among the last to leave and he kept looking at Gorin in a puzzled manner, as if recalling the tense moments when he thought Gorin was going to shoot him down in cold blood. There was no doubt of it, the tangle with Gorin had left a deep imprint on Ace.

Mrs. Blodgett, dressed in moth-eaten, old-fashioned finery which she had probably not worn since she was a girl, walked close to her youngest son. She seemed confused and frightened by the proceedings, but her face had a determined, set look.

Mike dropped over to the hospital late that afternoon to see Dorothy Blodgett. She seemed quietly glad to see him once more.

"I want to thank you again for pulling me through," Mike said earnestly. "The specialist you brought and your own care turned the trick."

"Maybe I was just protecting my father," she said with a smile.

"In that case," Mike declared, "you'll be glad to know that I'm not going to testify against your father."

"Oh, I don't know what should be done," Dorothy cried out hopelessly. "I've thought and thought until it seemed as if I should go mad. And I don't know what should be done. We're governed by crazy codes instead of common sense. If you testify pap will be convicted. Then you'll be safe from him and he from you. But you won't testify and that means he'll be free. Then one or both of you will be dead within a few days. It all goes around in a vicious circle."

"You understand that I hadn't any choice about coming to the trial?" Mike asked. "I had to accept the sheriff's escort."

"I understand," she answered. "Ace was over early this morning. He's changed. He seems moody and in a trance half the time. What happened between him and Gorin?"

"It's a long story and has no bearing on the trial," Mike told her. He picked up his hat. "I'll see you in court. The trial shouldn't last long."

Selection of the jury proved to be difficult. Some candidates didn't like the Blodgetts and said so frankly. Others claimed to have formed opinions. "Hell," one of them snorted at Judge Conrade, "it's simple as the nose on your face. Somebody shot Mike Cotter. Who but Lafe Blodgett would've done it? He's guilty."

The court excused that juror. Eventually the box was filled. After the prosecutor for the State and Conrade for the defense had made their opening addresses, the former called Mike Cotter to the stand.

A hush settled on the room as Mike took the witness stand and was sworn in. He looked over the crowded benches, seeing many of the Blodgetts for the first time. Some had grown up while he had been away, others had drifted into the country. They lined the walls for their own women and the townspeople and men summoned for jury duty filled the benches.

Mrs. Blodgett, tense, kept twisting her dress in her thin, crooked fingers. Ace, who looked like a child for all of his seventeen years, was a skinny statue in ragged clothing. His eyes kept shifting from his father, guarded by two deputies, to Mike. But his face never gave any indication of his feelings.

The prosecutor put the usual questions and Mike admitted that he was riding, leading a colt, when he was shot. "And is the man who shot you in this room?"

"He may be," Mike admitted, "but—" While he hesitated, the silence was thick enough to slice. Would he break the age-old code of refusal to iden-

tify an assailant? "Whoever fired the shot was in the brush," Mike continued. "You know how it is when a man is in the brush. He's hard to see."

"Was Lafe Blodgett that man?" the prosecutor demanded.

"I said it was hard to see," Mike replied evenly.

"That's all!" the prosecutor said abruptly. "Cross-examination."

"No cross-examination," declared Judge Conrade.

"I'll call Mrs. Blodgett," the prosecutor said.

Blodgett jerked with surprise. The amazed Blodgetts lining the walls seemed to freeze. "First Blodgett woman," one man rasped, "that ever turned traitor on her man."

The woman winced. "I love my man," she began in a scared, choking voice. "He knows that. Don't yuh, Lafe?" Lafe's lips did not move. He stared at his wife coldly. "I've worked an' slaved," Mrs. Blodgett went on. "I've buried two boys that got killed feudin'. I . . . I want to keep the others. Lafe fills 'em with hate and I can't stop him. I don't want Lafe killed." She clenched her fists and shook them. "Can't yuh understand, Lafe, what I'm tryin' to tell yuh?" She appealed to those lining the walls. "Can't *you* understand?"

Cold stares met her appeal.

"If the court please," Conrade protested. "This is out of order. The witness hasn't been sworn. Besides, a woman can't be forced to testify against her husband."

"You will wait, Mrs. Blodgett," the judge said in a kindly voice, "until your rights have been explained to you. The law does not compel you to testify against Lafe. But if you wish to do so, you may. Then you may tell only what you, personally know, and not what someone else told you."

"I don't know what's best," the woman moaned. "I love Lafe. Now he's hatin' me. All of 'em will hate me. But I don't care," she whispered defiantly. "I *will* talk." She put up her hand to be sworn.

Ace's eyes were like burning coals. He jumped to his feet. "No . . . I'll talk," he shouted. "I was there!" A murmur passed through the courtroom. Lafe Blodgett looked at his son and his lips curled. "Ma, yuh don't hafta make dad hate yuh," Ace cried. "I'm young. I can stand hate better'n you can."

The spectacle of a boy testifying against his own father stirred the spectators deeply. "That ain't right either," someone said. "Seems like nothin' ain't right any more."

"Weren't right for a Blodgett to welsh on a bet years ago," another man retorted.

"That's a damn lie," a Blodgett shouted. "Cotters ran a crooked race—"

"A Cotter never ran a crooked race in his life," Mike bellowed. He jumped to his feet and faced the Blodgetts.

"Keep your shirt on," Gorin admonished, jerking Mike back into his chair.

The judge pounded for order and got it when he threatened to clear the room. "If the court please," Conrade boomed, his voice heavy with drama, "the finest, sweetest, dearest traditions of family life are destroyed when a mere child is forced to testify against his father. It's an outrage! Outrage! This misguided boy will carry the brand of this tragic hour—"

"Well, now, Conrade," Mike Cotter drawled. "You're laying it on rather thick. But you're right. Neither Mrs. Blodgett nor Ace should testify. I've been refreshing my memory while I've been sitting here. I'd like to take the stand again."

"Now you're on the spot," Gorin whispered. "But you've saved that kid from goin' through hell. God bless you, Mike."

The spectators leaned forward. They appreciated that Mike was motivated by pity for Ace Blodgett and his mother, but if he testified against Lafe and sent him to prison, then he branded himself as a squealer—a tattletale.

"Now that you have refreshed your memory," the prosecutor said, "who shot you, Mr. Cotter?"

"Lafe Blodgett!" Mike answered. A murmur swept through the room. Mike's eyes were on Dorothy Blodgett as he testified. Her eyes flashed with scorn.

The prosecutor asked further questions, but they merely went to confirm his blunt statement that Lafe had shot him with buckshot and blinded his colt. "Cross-examine," the prosecutor said triumphantly.

Judge Conrade prepared to earn the fee Bert Atwood was paying him to defend Lafe. He beat about the bush for several minutes in a scholarly manner, then got in what he felt was a devastating stroke.

"You say you were armed, that you saw Mr. Blodgett in the brush," he said pompously. "You realize, of course, that if what you say is true, and Mr. Blodgett was accompanied by a child of youthful years, he was undoubtedly afraid you would renew the feud, with the risk that the child would be hurt?"

"That could be." Mike was quite cheerful about it.

"Therefore, Mr. Blodgett took refuge in the brush until you passed," Conrade continued. "While taking said refuge you observed him. Realizing that he was detected, he must have supposed you would shoot instantly."

"That was a reasonable supposition on his part," Mike admitted.

"As a matter of fact, each of you believed his life in danger, each went for his weapons and Blodgett got in the first shot," Conrade shouted. He faced the jury. "It's a story, gentlemen, as old as the West itself."

Conrade had a lot more to say, and so did the prosecutor later on. To the latter it was obvious Mike had coasted along and allowed the attorney for the defense to smash his testimony in order to preserve the tradition and to save Mrs. Blodgett and Ace from turning against their own kin. Personally, the prosecutor admired Mike for his action, but professionally he seethed.

"You've signed a death warrant for somebody," he told Mike in a low voice when the jury left the room. "Probably your own."

"I hope sometime Lafe will wake up to the fact if we work together, we'll raise thoroughbreds by the hundred. Blodgett water on Cotter bottom land in the summer will settle the feed question forever," Mike said. He knew that Lafe was hearing what he said, so he leaned closer and added, "A woman brave enough to do what your wife was willing to do today, Lafe, is a woman worth having."

Lafe made no answer. The hate burned as brightly as ever in his eyes. But the contempt was gone. This last Cotter ran true to the breed. He was no tattletale running to the law for protection.

The jury came in with their verdict a few minutes later. "Betcha a dollar Lafe ain't guilty," Gorin whispered to Mike.

"Cinch bet," Mike answered. "That's the only verdict they can bring in."

The spectators listened quietly while the verdict was read. Then the Blodgetts broke into a wild cheer. Lafe walked over to them, looking straight through his wife and Ace. "Come on, you Blodgetts," he ordered, "let's git out o' here and t' home."

They moved toward the door. Mrs. Blodgett and Ace started to follow. Lafe turned swiftly. He ignored his wife, but knocked Ace spinning with his open hand. "I said *Blodgetts,*" he snarled. "You ain't Blodgetts, you ain't even Cotters. You're just somethin' crawlin' under slimy stones."

Mike Cotter watched Dorothy Blodgett as her father dealt with his family in his own way. She hesitated, torn with the dissension of conflicting codes. Then she kissed her mother's gaunt cheek, let her hand fall gently on Ace's shoulder and followed the others from the room.

VI.

The prosecuting attorney paused for a word with Mike. "You knocked my case into a cocked hat," he said, "but no hard feelings. We speak the same language. And it's a good language for our kind of country. But what about the two casualties, Mrs. Blodgett and Ace? They're people without a country, now."

"I'll have to take 'em under my wing," Mike answered. "Trouble is, there aren't many feathers on the wing these days."

With Gorin and Senator Hardy he joined the bewildered Blodgetts. "Have you any plans?" Mike asked Mrs. Blodgett.

"Don't know what we'll do," the woman answered helplessly.

"I'll find a job," Ace said sturdily. "I'll get somethin' or other to do."

"I've got an idea," Gorin said. "I don't believe in tellin' a boy his life's all wrong, as I did you, Ace, then not do somethin' about it. Can you ride horses?"

"Ain't done nothin' else since I was knee-high to a grasshopper," Ace answered. "You ain't meanin' jockeyin', are yuh?"

"Had that in mind," Gorin admitted. "I've been watchin' you the past couple of days, Ace. You have a way with horses, seems like."

"I just kind o' feel good around 'em," the boy said, his eyes glowing. "And they seem to feel peacefullike when I'm around. Ever notice how you can just kind o' touch a horse with yore hand and talk to 'em and make 'em do what you want?"

"You bet we have," Mike answered with feeling. "A boy who can do that is worth plenty to any good breeder."

"Ace, the Blue Mountain Ranch will sign you on as their jockey," Gorin said. "Till we're ready to use you, I'll get in touch with a man who'll give you some jobs jockeying. Your ma'll have to sign the contract."

"I can only make a mark," Mrs. Blodgett said.

"Senator Hardy will fix all that," Gorin assured her. "Now that leaves you to be taken care of."

"Our regular hired girl is going to get married in a couple of months," Hardy remarked. "If you feel like doing housework, Mrs. Blodgett, you can take her place. Meanwhile, Molly can be breaking you in till she leaves. The work won't be hard."

"Seems like the time I've put in on my prayer bones ain't been wasted," the woman said gratefully. "Now if my prayers for my old man will jest be answered—"

"Wearin' down your prayer bones won't help much with him, Mrs. Blodgett," Gorin said. "When he sees you're getting along all right without him, he'll sing a different tune."

Gorin borrowed enough money from Senator Hardy to send Ace to a small breeder of good horses. "He'll tell you all you want to know," Gorin said. "It's up to you to prepare yourself against the day you'll wear the blue and white silks of Blue Mountain Ranch."

An amazed mother saw an excited son off on the train the following afternoon. Dressed in new store clothes, with his first haircut by a real barber, Ace Blodgett didn't look much like his old self.

"S'long, ma," he cried. "I'll work on my writin' so I can send you letters. Mr. Hardy will read 'em to you. An' some of these days I'll buy you a silk dress and a fine hat. Maybe even a five-dollar one."

"Oh, go on," she said happily, "what'd I do with a silk dress an' a five-dollar hat? I'd be a sight for the jaybirds."

She watched the train until it was out of sight, then got into Senator Hardy's buckboard and was driven to her new home.

That evening the senator, Mike and Gorin held a conference. "This is what you might call a meeting of the finance committee," the senator explained. "Bert Atwood was around the other day wanting to know if Blue Mountain Ranch couldn't be sold for taxes. He was told it could be, as soon as another year's taxes were due. I paid a year's taxes, and settled that. You can stay on the ranch a year and four months before it can be sold from under you, Mike. Of course, the mortgage holder might put on a little pressure if the interest isn't paid. What are your plans?"

"I want to make a systematic hunt for that colt," Mike answered promptly. "Call me crazy if you want to, but I must see his bones to be convinced he's dead."

"You're like your old man, always leaning on the long chance," the senator sighed. "In his case he won just often enough to prove he was right. And it was always interesting whether he won or lost."

"I'll take a few of the old hands," Mike continued, "and round up every head of stock that can be found. The horses should bring a fair price from riding academies and we might pick up two or three thousand dollars' worth of beef. I'm going into the Cameron Hole country, too. There's always a chance some of the wilder cattle and horses drifted over there."

"If they have, the Blodgetts have found 'em long ago," the senator pointed out.

"I don't agree with you," said Mike. "The Blodgetts haven't ambition enough to go after wild cattle. What I'm worried about is where I'm going to get money for running expenses."

"Years ago," the senator spoke reflectively, "I was in a hole. I looked like a total loss. Your father gave me all the money I needed without security. Now it's my turn. I'm not a rich man, Mike, but I'm confident you can cut the mustard, so call on me for anything you need." He cut off Mike's attempt to express his gratitude. "Never mind thanking me. But if you hear of a long shot, likely to be out in front at the finish, let me know."

When Mike and Gorin drove out to the ranch the following day, the latter insisted that they use a buckboard. On the buckboard was loaded two rifles, two shotguns, and plenty of ammunition. "I don't expect to meet any Blodgetts," Gorin said. "In fact, I'll betcha a dollar we don't, but if we do, we're ready."

They drove home, through a land so peaceful that only mossy headboards in Blodgett and Cotter cemeteries could prove a feud had turned the country into bloody turmoil.

Mike was ready for action as soon as he arrived home. His working hours would have to be brief at first because his normal strength and endurance had not yet returned, but he was impatient to get started. For nearly a month he combed the remote draws and canyons on the ranch and chased out horses and cattle. Often a single animal was all that a canyon yielded. Again he would find several. It was like discovering money in the pockets of discarded clothing.

Presently Mike and his riders pushed through a narrow pass, one of the few not on Blodgett range, to the Cameron Hole country. The Chinese cook drove the chuck wagon, while Mike and his ancient buckaroos rode ahead, searching every thicket.

They talked constantly of cattle, but in each man's mind was thought of the colt's bones. Betcha-a-dollar Gorin searched wolf and coyote dens methodically. Near each, as a rule, bones could be found in varying quantity. He brought in a colt's bones one day, but they were too small, Mike insisted.

Twice small herds of cattle were driven back to the ranch; and a band of wild horses some of the old ones bearing the Blue Mountain brand, were gathered and sent on their way. It was a time of much activity for everyone.

As the roundup progressed, Mike found himself giving less time to the actual hunt and more to penetrating remote canyons in the badlands. As a boy, he had explored them to some extent, but now, he fixed the confusion of game trails, box canyons and buttes in his mind. He studied landmarks until he felt confident he could find his way out from any given point. There had been legends of men becoming lost in the badlands of Cameron Hole and never being found.

Human bones bleached by time, and a rusty rifle partly confirmed the legends when Mike blundered into a canyon one day. A fine spring and fresh deer sign aroused his hopes that something interesting might develop. But he found no horse's hoofprints. Beyond the spring he found a passage so narrow he dismounted and led his horse.

There might not be hoofprints about the spring, but there was horse hair stuck to the splintered rocks forming the canyon wall. Mike pushed on until the passage widened. Presently it opened into a valley, walled in by mountains. The place was alive with deer grazing on knee-deep grass. Clumps of pines grew along the ridges and he found stumps where logs had been taken for a cabin.

The remains of the cabin were visible a short distance away. The roof had fallen in and the logs lay scattered about. Rusty cans and a rotting express box suggested this was, indeed, the outlaw Cameron's hide-out. Cameron and his men must have cleared the bottom land and planted hay to provide horse feed. The seed had scattered until now wild hay grew high on the slopes. "A regular horse heaven," Mike reflected.

It was too late to return to the chuck wagon so Mike camped for the night. At daybreak the thunder of horses' hoofs woke him. The earth shook as a band galloped past in some real or fancied fright. His own mount whinnied, but there was no answer.

Standing, half unclothed in the crisp morning air, Mike saw the band move like phantoms in the gray light and disappear.

He dressed hastily, ate a cold meal, saddled and followed. The band hadn't disappeared through the narrow passage he had followed, so he assumed there must be another entrance to the valley. He dismounted at a point where the band had spread out and attempted to determine the size and number of the animals by the tracks.

He was looking for colt tracks, of course, and trying to allow for the fact that by now the tracks would be larger. He found a set of tracks that seemed to fit the bill and fought to hold back his elation. "You're crazy," he told himself. "There're colts this size in every band. Come down to earth."

There were three colts in the band, he concluded. There was nothing else to attract attention and he was about to leave when he noticed something peculiar in the tracks made by a pair of animals. When one turned to avoid an obstruction, the other turned on almost exactly the same curve, then swung back to the original course, as if harnessed together. "Huh! Now I wonder about that?" Mike mused.

He followed the tracks until again the band had spread. Other horses might scatter, but these two always remained together. Even a frightened colt wouldn't remain that close to its mother. Mike, the eternal optimist, gave his hopes free rein. "If one horse was blind," he reasoned, "and it formed an attachment for another and used its eyes, the two would leave tracks like these."

He followed the band in hot pursuit, hoping for a brief glimpse. The sun was up now and the band should stop, but buttes and ridges prevented a close view. He wound back and forth, expecting each turn to reveal the horses. But invariably he was so late the dust had always settled. Not once had the two sets of tracks holding his interest separated. Mike decided to return for the other riders and make an intensive search for the band.

VII.

Gorin and the others listened intently when Mike returned to the chuck wagon and related what had happened. "Betcha a dollar you're on a wild-goose chase," Gorin snorted.

"I'll take that bet," Mike answered. "Suppose we leave the chuck wagon here, take a couple of days' grub and stay with the band until we can see what's in it."

"Good idear," Gorin agreed. "And if it ain't a bunch of crowbaits we'll haze it to the ranch, though it'll be a tough job in these badlands."

The outfit required most of the day to reach the valley Mike had discovered. They scattered, each taking different canyons leading out of the valley, agreeing to report late that night. Tracks were everywhere, but none of them were recent. It looked as if the band had quit the country.

"But no horse is goin' to leave heaven," Gorin argued. "That band'll come back sometime. Tomorrow mornin' we'll climb the highest butte and stay there. No percentage in runnin' round."

That struck Mike as being sound logic. They hobbled their horses and scaled a butte that was higher than most of the ridges. Scattering in the four directions, they looked down on hundreds of square miles of buttes, mountains and canyons, and waited. The old buckaroos kept their pipes going, while the younger men, including Mike, smoked cigarettes in chains.

Noon passed and no telltale dust clouds drifted through the canyons. Then around four o'clock, Gorin let out a shout. "Come here, Mike. Hurry!"

Mike ran to join Gorin who was standing on an overhanging rock looking into a canyon a quarter mile from the base of the butte. The band had evidently been dozing in a dense pine thicket most of

the day. Suddenly something, perhaps a marauding bear, had startled them.

A brood mare was at the head of the long line of animals. A white stallion brought up the rear. Midway, Mike saw a colt that stood out from the scrub animals like a peak above a plain.

Black and long-legged, he ran close to a paint mare that possessed most of the faults that bring gray hair to breeders. She had nothing to recommend her but toughness. As she galloped back and forth, clearing obstacles by ample margin, the black colt kept his shoulder against her ribs. When she turned toward him his nose struck her neck and he turned. When she moved in the other direction there was a split second when his shoulder lost contact with hers. But it was only a split second, then he was touching her side again.

Mike kept the binoculars glued to his eyes until the band disappeared, then he lowered them. "That's the colt, Betcha!" he cried.

"It's goin' to be tough to catch him without him goin' into a panic and fallin' over a cliff or somethin'," Gorin predicted. "He's got everything . . . everything but sight. I've never seen a prettier stride, just eats up the ground. And there's a world of reserve power locked up in that black body."

"I think I know the route that band will take," Mike said suddenly. "Come on." He began running down the steep trail that led from the top of the butte.

Gorin followed, yelling, "Slow down, you fool, or you'll break your neck."

But there wasn't time to play safe, and as Mike neared the base he went sprawling and nearly did break his neck. He got up, covered with dust and limping. The horses were a few rods distant. He caught his own, removed the hobbles, saddled it and was off before the others had finished their descent.

His horse gave nearly everything it had in the half-mile run. The canyon narrowed at this point, and they were down wind from the band. Mike's horse was still blowing when he heard the first hoofbeats, a low rumble that grew stronger and became an earthquake.

The leaders of the band failed to detect Mike as they pounded past. Mike, tense and eager, his eyes blazing with excitement, leaned forward in his saddle, his rope ready. He hoped there was one more burst of speed in his horse. Suddenly he swung in beside the band.

There was momentary panic as those nearest saw the intruder. Several came to an abrupt stop and tried to turn. The horses behind piled into them. The leaders continued on at a faster speed. The colt was having a desperate time keeping close to the frightened paint mare. Mike's rope made an arc, settled about the colt's neck and tightened with a loud *zip*.

The colt lunged and screamed. He reared and struck out viciously with his front feet, fighting blind, not knowing the type of enemy threatening him. "Poor little devil!" Mike growled. He spurred his own mount in close, until the colt could feel the contact. He quieted, but his superb body trembled from head to foot and he kept snorting and occasionally striking out with his front hoofs. The band, now split, galloped away in opposite directions.

"Easy, boy!" Mike spoke in a soothing voice. "Easy!" The colt went into another furious struggle to escape. He had forgotten human voices, or else memory of them had been clouded by his recent experiences. Mike talked some more, and when the other men rode up, he told them to keep as quiet as possible to give the colt a chance to calm down.

"Blacker than midnight," Gorin said in a low voice. "Look, Mike, his coat is worn on the left side where he kept it against that paint mare."

"It's a crime the track will never see a hoss like that one," an old buckaroo remarked.

"Betcha a dollar that black will run," Gorin said. "What do you think Mike's bringin' him in for?"

"Breedin'!" the man answered. "What else?"

"Breedin'," Gorin agreed, "and racin'. I'll betcha a dollar you'll be bettin' your shirt on that black's nose inside a year."

"Sure, Cotter men bet on Cotter horses, straight, place, show or also ran," the cowboy agreed. "And I'll bet on this one if Mike runs him. But he'll never win no races. Why? Because there'll always have to be a horse just a neck ahead of him for him to *feel*, or he'll be lost and slow up. He's run into a lot of things since he was blinded. And it's left its mark."

Gorin cursed softly. Mike Cotter would probably go broke trying to prove that theory was all wrong. His faith in the colt would be boundless. It would blend with his willingness to take a long chance. Men like Bert Atwood and Lafe Blodgett would be quick to take advantage of the situation. If Mike wasn't careful, Atwood would profit by the colt the elder Cotter had spent a fortune and most of his life in developing.

Mike put in two days gaining the colt's confidence. He got him used to his voice, then the touch of his hand. Again and again the colt whirled and struck out with his front feet at a sound that frightened him.

"He's learned to depend on his ears to locate danger," Gorin said. "Man alive, but he can whirl and strike sudden. One blow would kill the average man or animal. Have you got a name for him yet?"

"I've turned a number over in my mind, but haven't decided," Mike answered. "Senator Hardy told me dad hadn't settled on anything, either. It was one of the unfinished pieces of business he left."

"What's the matter with Midnight?" Gorin suggested. "It's a name easy to remember. He's black, and he's following a blind trail."

"Midnight!" Mike repeated. In his mind he was standing near the finish line at some future time and the crowd was roaring, "*Come on, Midnight!*" He looked at the colt again. "Midnight, Wins Winter Mile! Midnight Wins Kentucky Derby! Midnight Wins —" He seemed to be reading headlines. "It'll sound swell in the newspapers," he declared. "Midnight it is."

The trip back to the ranch was a long, slow one. Mike concluded the colt must have encountered the paint mare shortly after he was wounded, and the two of them had slowly worked their way into the badlands. Certainly at that stage of his life he had not hurried, because as soon as the trail became rough, Midnight proceeded with excessive caution.

The outfit heaved a collective sigh when they opened a Blue Mountain Ranch gate and the colt stepped onto Cotter range land once more. Betcha-a-dollar Gorin rested up a day then went into town. As usual, Senator Hardy's head was over a racing form.

"What do you think about Sal in the seventh race?" Hardy demanded.

The colt lunged and screamed as Mike's rope settled about his neck and tightened with a loud zip.

"Sal should be hauling a laundry wagon," Gorin snapped.

"She's the seventh horse in the seventh race," the senator argued. "I always bet on the seventh horse in the seventh race."

"Did any of 'em ever come in?"

"Well, only when I wasn't betting on them," the senator admitted.

"I thought so. Listen, forget betting for a while. We've got the colt back. He's blind, but in fine shape."

"That's good news!" the senator exclaimed. "Now Blue Mountain Ranch can breed a racing stock that'll turn the turf upside down."

"But Mike's goin' to run him," Gorin explained. "There've been other blind race horses. This is goin' to be the greatest. We need the fastest mare we can find to be Midnight's eyes—that's his name. A mare that'll make him extend hisself. He's got to run a lot."

"I know just the mare," Hardy declared. "Name's Dulcie. The Blodgetts raised her, then Lafe got be-

hind on his taxes and sold Dulcie to Poker Bill, an Indian. Six months ago Bill lost Dulcie in a poker game. Her owner wants five thousand for her."

"Ask him to loan her to us for a year and we'll buy her for ten thousand if Midnight wins the Winter Mile," Gorin told him. "If he loses, we'll return the mate trained to the minute."

Dulcie's owner had evidently heard something of Gorin's reputation as a trainer. He jumped at the deal Gorin offered. Besides, he had won the mare in a poker game and there was a chance he might lose her in the same manner.

Gorin picked up Dulcie and led her to the ranch. At first she resented Midnight's running with his shoulder against her side. She bared her teeth and nipped at him. Then seeming to undertsand that it was something she must learn to endure, she accepted it.

Usually they ranged within sight of the house. Here the bottom land was almost level and free of obstructions. A creek ran through the center of the valley, but its banks were protected by low willows and there was little chance of the colt tumbling in.

Under Mike's supervision men put the mile track in shape again. It was located on a bench a short distance from the house. For several decades Cotter horses had been trained on the track. Within the mile was a half-mile track which the Cotters had often soaked with water during the dry season to accustom their horses to muddy footing.

Mike and Gorin trained the two horses on the track until snow began to fly, then called a halt until spring. There were sheds where the horse could escape the rain and snow, but aside from that, the animals roughed it. Gorin believed in letting race horses lead a natural life in order to build up resistance.

With the first training period over, Mike and his outfit drove most of the horses and cattle they had rounded up to Mesquite Coulee. From there they were shipped to the coast, where the cattle were sold for beef and the horses bought by representatives of riding academies.

"We can limp through until next fall," Mike told his crew when he finished the deal. "I've got to take care of the mortgage interest and the ranch overhead. That means you boys will have to get along on tobacco money until things pick up. When Midnight wins his first big purse, you'll be paid off in full with a bonus. If any man can't see his way clear to accept such a deal I'll pay him off now."

"We've talked things over already," one of the old-timers said. "Leave our pay on the books until there's some big race, then if you can manage to give us a little on account we'll put it on Midnight's nose."

Mike wasn't surprised. That was the way Cotter riders usually felt about things.

When spring came and the snow was off the ground, Mike rode to town; rode warily as usual, because he never knew when he would be blasted by Blodgett guns. The seeming peace had not deceived him in the slightest.

He stopped at the hospital and asked for Dorothy Blodgett. She seemed glad to see him and they chatted with great friendliness until Mike asked about Ace.

"He's been riding steadily," Dorothy answered, her face clouding. "Several owners have wanted him to sign on with them, but it seems you have a contract."

Mike nodded, but said nothing.

"It would be a fine thing if you released him the next time he has a real chance, Mike," Dorothy said.

"I signed him to ride Midnight," Mike explained. "I need someone who loves horses and understands them. Ace is a natural."

"It won't work, Mike," Dorothy said sadly. "You can't kill the feud in people's hearts once it is planted there."

"How's your mother getting along?" Mike asked, to change the subject.

"She's not happy. After all, she loves pap," the girl replied. "She met him last month on the street. He turned his back. And so did the others."

"Including the two boys she was trying to save when she hoped to end the feud by testifying against your father?" Mike asked.

"They never thanked her for it. They didn't want to be protected," Dorothy explained. "They wanted to carry on the feud."

Mike shrugged his shoulders with some irritation. He was increasingly attracted to Dorothy Blodgett, and at times he was convinced that she felt the same way about him, but any attempt to reach an understanding with her seemed to lead to bitter hopelessness on her part. He rose to his feet and said an abrupt good-by.

"Where are you going?" the girl asked.

"Oh, I'm not going to do anything desperate," Mike answered. "I'm just going to wire Ace to come home and ride Midnight. We plan a long training period, a few races at county fairs and small tracks so the colt will get used to the crowds and the noise. Then the Winter Mile."

"Bringing Ace home to work on Cotter range?" Dorothy asked in a frightened voice. "Don't, Mike. Please don't do it. Don't you see you're tossing a match into a powder keg."

"There's one thing I won't do, Dorothy," Mike answered flatly. "And that's turn tail and run from your people. We planned for Ace to help train Midnight. And that's the way it's going to be. If there's any trouble it'll start with the Blodgetts."

VIII.

Mike Cotter was in Mesquite Coulee when the east-bound train slowed to a stop and Ace Blodgett jumped off. The boy had put on enough weight to

make him lose his scarecrow look. His eyes were alert and he radiated self-confidence.

"Hello, sis!" Ace shouted at Dorothy who had come with her mother to meet him. He hugged his mother with a display of affection he would once have been ashamed to show. He displayed a package. "Look, I bought you that silk dress and hat."

"Land sakes, Ace," Mrs. Blodgett said, flushing with pleasure. "Me in silk clothes." She was shy, almost afraid of her well-dressed son. Ace had lost much of his mountain vocabulary. "Hello, Mike," he yelled as the latter came over to meet him. "You're looking better. Fact is, I'd say you could lick your weight in wild cats or Blodgetts right now."

"I hope I don't have to," Mike answered.

"Dad in town?" Ace asked. "I hope he's changed, but I suppose it ain't likely."

"He hasn't changed," Dorothy said. "Ace, please don't go to the Blue Mountain Ranch."

"I'm a contract rider," her brother declared. "I learned a lot at the big tracks. If a jockey is crooked or don't live up to his contract the stewards set him down. I'm goin' out to see dad and try to learn him some things."

"I'd rather you didn't," Mike told him. "Let's win a big race, then go to him. He's liable to raise a rumpus now."

"Maybe all he needs is a good talkin' to," Ace said.

And though Mike argued all the way to the ranch, he couldn't change Ace's determination to visit his father. However, when Ace saw Midnight his enthusiasm made him postpone the trip temporarily. He rode the colt around the mile track with Mike astride Dulcie. His excitement was boundless.

"With any kind of luck, he'll win the Winter Mile," he exclaimed as he dismounted. "He'll be a long shot, too. We should clean up." Then he looked at the mountains. "Can I borry a saddle horse, Mike? Think I'll mosey along and see dad."

Ace knew the Blodgetts saw him coming long before he turned into the lane leading to the cluster of log cabins known as the Blodgett home ranch. But only the dogs greeted him. He dismounted and walked to the door of the largest cabin. His younger brothers and sisters were peering from second-floor windows. Their eyes were grave and interested.

He started to go in, but when he swung the door wide, Lafe Blodgett towered above him. "You ain't no Blodgett," he snarled. "Git!"

"It's time somebody talked sense round here, dad," Ace said evenly. "Everywhere I've been, oldtimers talk about Blue Mountain country horses. They didn't call 'em Cotter horses or Blodgett horses, just Blue Mountain horses. Instead of livin' like dogs, we could live on the fat of the land if we put our minds to raisin' horses."

"You're lyin'!" Lafe snarled. "I've listened to hoss talk. They call 'em Cotter hosses."

"Once in a while they call 'em Cotter horses," Ace admitted. "But mostly it's Blue Mountain—"

"Lies!" Lafe roared. "You're a yaller-bellied traitor." He struck Ace with his fist and knocked the boy halfway across the room. "Now git back to yore Cotters." Ace tried to get up, but fell back, still groggy from the blow. Lafe pondered several seconds. "You're a good jockey, they claim. Think I'll keep you here where you can't help Cotter." He bound his son with rope and placed him in a storeroom. "Guess I'd better git word to Mr. Atwood," he mused. "He'll know what to do next."

Lafe knew Bert Atwood did not relish a week end in a mountain cabin, but he also knew Mr. Atwood's greed was so profound he would endure almost any personal discomfort to gain a few dollars. In this instance he was making a play for the Cotter ranch and was risking a barrel of money to win it.

A week after Ace's return, Bert Atwood appeared. He was a man whose bones were well covered with soft flesh. He wore the best clothing, ate the most expensive food. From the expression about his mouth it was evident he had sucked his thumb and pouted until he had gotten his own way as a youngster. He still insisted on getting his own way. As a result he had the fine art of the double-cross down to a science.

Atwood listened until Lafe had given all details of the present situation. "You're handling it wrong, Lafe," he said decisively. "Now you turn Ace loose. Tell him you've been thinking things over and have decided he's right."

"Goes agin' the grain to say I'm wrong, even when I don't mean it," Lafe declared stubbornly.

"Don't be bullheaded, Lafe," Atwood argued. "You're not giving in. You're just making him think you are. In the end you'll win hands down. Here's the plan. Blood's thicker'n water. You're Ace's old man. He'd give his right arm to be on good terms. All right, get on good terms with him. When the day of the big race comes let him know you've got everything the family owns on my horse, Breeze. Stir up his loyalty. Show him it's his big chance to get even with the Cotters. And—the Cotter horse won't win."

"I'll think it over," Lafe said reluctantly. "Come along, I'll let you see Cotter's Midnight run. They give him a workout every mornin' 'bout this time."

They rode a mile to a ridge overlooking the Cotter spread. Atwood watched the work-out with a pair of powerful binoculars. Mike and Gorin were riding Midnight and Dulcie. Atwood studied the colt's magnificent stride for several seconds. "Without Ace to pull that colt," he said, "we're sunk. I'm almost tempted to forget all about the fast work

and bet on Midnight's nose. He'll be a long shot. Still, that won't work. If Mike's a chip off the old block, he'll shoot the works on the colt. I'd like to trick him into backing his faith with the ranch and the colt himself. No, we'll have to work through Ace. Get him to throw the race."

"The old double-cross, eh?" Lafe said.

"The old double-cross," echoed Atwood. "Say," he added softly, "I've just learned something. That blind colt stays right up with the mare, but never takes the lead. Don't you see, Lafe? That horse isn't used to being out in front. The horse ahead is his eyes. I'll bet if Midnight should close up and the jockey he was overtaking should sting him across the eyes with his whip he'd think he was running into danger and quit cold. Lafe, at last the Cotters are sunk."

Lafe weighed the odds against the colt winning as they rode back to his cabin. First, there was Midnight's reluctance to push ahead of the horse on his left, which served as his eyes. Second, if the colt did push ahead and the overtaken jockey whipped him across the head near the eyes, he would instinctively flinch and lose his stride. And if all this failed, Ace could be persuaded to pull the colt. If the stewards called him on the carpet he could argue the colt had refused to take the lead at the finish.

"Seems like everything's gonna be agin' the colt at the finish," Lafe observed. "Seems like he ain't got a chanct."

"You've summed up the situation, Lafe," Atwood answered. "Now get on the good side of Ace and Cotter is sunk."

Lafe unlocked the storeroom door and a very sullen Ace walked out. A week's confinement had put the kid in a fighting mood. He glared, then looked at his father again, puzzled.

"Ace," Lafe said in a friendly tone, "I'm a man what hates to admit he's wrong. It's fittin' for Blodgetts to fight Cotters. But it ain't fittin' for Blodgett to fight Blodgett. Yore ma signed a paper sayin' you'd ride with the Cotters. Blodgetts keep their word, even if they ain't much in some ways."

Atwood glowed at the response Lafe's speech got from Ace. A happy light filled the boy's eyes. Lafe had hooked his son and the barb had gone deep. The feud had done one thing, Atwood realized, it had developed a fierce sense of family loyalty.

"Damn it all, pap," Ace shouted, "I knowed all you needed was time to think things over. They don't come any better than you."

Lafe Blodgett bared his yellow snags in a grin. He was doing a fine job, Atwood thought, even putting a convincing feeling into his grin. But to make certain some minor incident didn't start a flare-up between them Atwood said, "I'm riding to town, Ace. I'd like you to ride along with me as far as Cotter's."

"I hate to run off so soon," Ace said to his father, "but like as not, Mike Cotter'll be wonderin' what's happened to me."

IX.

Ace found Mike and Betcha-a-dollar Gorin in a worried mood, but not over his week's absence. "We know he can run as fast as Dulcie," Gorin was saying, "But we don't know how much faster, because he'll never shoot ahead and run alone."

Mike nodded. "He's lost as soon as he fails to feel the contact of another horse," he said. "The answer is, he's got to have confidence in his rider. From now on, Ace, you're going to ride him not only on the track, but over the range as well. Make him go on the dead run, then pull him up and let him make his way through bad going. Win his confidence completely. Tomorrow we're going to give the boy a time trial. I think I've figured out a plan that'll work."

Mike's plan didn't work for nearly a week, then after much practice he decided to try again. He gave a cowboy a stop watch and stationed him at the start. Mounted on a fast quarter horse, Mike himself waited on the opposite side of the track.

Ace on Midnight and Gorin on Dulcie came down the track on the run. Mike swung in behind the two and Dulcie moved over until Mike's horse was beside Midnight. For several yards Mike was nearly a length ahead. Then, with a burst of speed that caused the timer to bellow in sheer admiration, Midnight drew even with the quarter horse. They finished with the latter's head and neck in the lead. Ace and Mike pulled up, turned and went back.

"What's the time?" Mike asked.

"I can't believe my eyes," the buckaroo answered. "One minute and thirty-seven seconds. If he'd been pressed harder he'd have done better'n that."

"That's fast enough to win most races," Ace said. "If there was only some way of making him take the lead. Seems like he figgers other horses should be ahead when they're beside him."

"The old instinct he picked up with the wild band," Mike observed. "I thought with you riding and talking to him, he'd shake off that feeling." He shook his head gloomily, realizing Midnight was potentially a great horse, yet wondering how he could overcome the handicap his blindness had developed.

The cowboy gave Mike the stop watch and returned to the bunkhouse, muttering to himself. "As old as I am," he stormed when his companions returned, "I could go into them mountains and kill Lafe Blodgett for what he's done to thet colt. With eyes, he could be a world's champeen. And now—well, if Mike don't ferget winnin' races with Midnight he'll lose his shirt and ourn, too. It'd be better if he figgered on Midnight's sons winnin' big stakes."

"Trouble is, champeen's sons ain't always champeens," another cowboy argued. "Danged if I know what Mike'll do."

When fall came, Mike, Gorin, Ace, and Midnight moved into town. An item in the Mesquite Coulee *Messenger*, the region's weekly newspaper, announced the fact and carried a brief history of Blue Mountain Ranch. An editorial predicted horse raising would be revived to the prosperity of the ranch, Mesquite Coulee and the country generally.

Atwood read the item and guessed Mike Cotter's plans. He wrote Lafe Blodgett a letter which read in part:

Cotter is going to race Midnight at county fairs. Keep posted on Midnight's faults and what they are doing to correct them. Learn his weaknesses and report to me. I am sending my best jockey, Tad Scruby, to ride against Midnight and develop his weaknesses.

I've made arrangements for you to increase the loan on your ranch. You will be able to take care of present expenses, and have several thousand dollars on hand to bet on the Winter Mile.

Lafe Blodgett read the letter with his usual difficulty, then moved down to Mesquite Coulee. In so small a place he was bound to encounter Mike Cotter, but whenever they met, he looked straight through the younger man, or else spilled an insulting comment from the corner of his mouth.

There was a three-day race meet and a county fair at Mesquite Coulee, and when the horses lined up for the big race of the final day, Ace Blodgett found himself riding beside the jockey named Tad Scruby.

Ace instinctively distrusted Scruby with his superior manner and cold, shifty eyes. There was no doubt, though, that Scruby understood horses. The bell rang and the announcer droned: *"There they go!"*

Ace watched Scruby with one eye and Midnight with the other. The black held close to Scruby's horse all the way and came in an easy second. The crowds and the uproar from the stands apparently did not bother Midnight.

Scruby rode the cleanest race Ace had ever seen. He began to wonder if he had formed the wrong opinion of the rider.

"That blind horse has got plenty," Scruby told Ace after the race. "He kept up with my horse and didn't even seem to be trying."

"He runs easily," Ace answered. "This was his first race and I wanted to see how he acted."

"Playing the fairs?" Scruby inquired.

"Yep," Ace admitted after a moment's hesitation.

"Then we'll see plenty of each other. You rode a clean race, Blodgett. That's more than I can say of some others I've ridden against," said Scruby.

"You rode a clean race, too," Ace replied.

A week later found the two of them riding against each other at the Campion County Fair. Two weeks after that they met again at the Inter-County Fair.

The highest purse in the region was the Wyatt Handicap which paid fifteen hundred dollars.

"We're going after that," Mike announced, to Ace's delight. "Make Midnight break quick. Get him out in front and see if you can't stay there. It's worth trying. We know as long as he runs with others rubbing against him a quarter or so, he won't push ahead."

Senator Hardy, who had been breaking even betting on Midnight to place and show, wanted to bet a hundred dollars on the black's nose.

"Don't do it," Mike warned. "This is a horse race to most folks, but to us it's part of Midnight's education."

Ten minutes before the race Senator Hardy struggled mightily with temptation and lost. He placed five bets of a hundred dollars each in as many places. Then, whistling a merry tune, he took his place near the finish. "Six furlongs," the senator murmured to himself, "Midnight should make it in around one thirteen, or maybe one twelve. Or even—" He choked back the remainder as the race started. Midnight, in a superb starting burst of speed, went into the lead, then took the rail. Ace talked to Midnight all the way, talked as he had done many times when they were racing over the range or on the home track. He felt confidence surge through the horse as Midnight pounded headlong through utter blackness.

"Yaaaah! Nice goin', boy! *Yaaaah!* You've got 'em, boy! *Yaaaah!"* Midnight's ears were turned back to catch every word. Ace heard Scruby on a long-geared bay horse named Solo coming up behind. He was tempted to force Midnight's pace, but was afraid the colt might not have enough left for a burst at the finish in case he should be crowded. Solo's head came even with Midnight's shoulder, then Scruby began using the whip for the first time.

Solo shot into the lead. It was the situation Ace had been looking for. Would Midnight respond and take the lead or would he react to former habits? He touched the black with the whip and the horse partly responded. Scruby met the challenge. He lashed Solo, then deftly brought the whip across Midnight's eyes.

It happened so swiftly only Ace and Scruby saw it. To Midnight a lash across the eyes meant tree branches and danger. He stopped almost instantly, waiting for the others to come up and supply him with eyes. At the same time, he turned toward the rail to feel the contact of a horse against his left side.

His long slim legs struck the rail a glancing blow and Midnight somersaulted, throwing his rider clear. Ace struck the ground and rolled over and over, half stunned. He got to his feet and spoke

soothingly to the horse, then collapsed again. Two cowpunchers, watching the race near the rail, spurred their horses to a gallop just as Midnight regained his feet.

The terrified horse, hearing the approaching hoofs, galloped from what he believed was dire peril. A cry of horror swept through the grandstands as Midnight headed straight for a board fence. "He'll break his neck," Mike groaned.

Just in time, one of the punchers managed to get a rope over the horse's neck and turned him, then rode alongside. As Midnight felt the other horse against his shoulder he relaxed, trembling. By now Ace was on his feet again, his face ashen. He stumbled toward Midnight and got his arms around the black's neck. "It's all right, boy! It's all right! Easy! Easy . . . easy, old boy! It's Ace, boy!

Everything's all right, Midnight!"

Mike had reached the scene and was watching.

When Ace got the horse calmed down, he saw Scruby talking to the judges. He let go of Midnight's neck. "I'm goin' to kill him," Ace declared furiously. "He took a cut at Midnight."

"Keep your shirt on, Ace," Mike admonished. "Midnight isn't hurt, but you may be. If you're O. K., no damage has been done."

"You're wrong, Mike," Ace said hotly. "Chances are this has ruined Midnight. He's blind. Can't you remember that? He trusted me. When I told him he was all right he'd go like hell. He had confidence in me. Now it's gone. You can't expect a blind horse to take a chance again. He won't trust me.. He'll figger I double-crossed him."

He shook off Mike's restraining hand and started for Scruby. As the crowd sensed Ace's purpose it realized the other jockey was guilty of some outrage against a blind horse. Suddenly a roar of boos rolled over the field. Scruby said something to the judges and they nodded.

The announcer shouted for silence. When he got it, he said: "Jockey Scruby has refused to accept first place. Through an accident, his whip struck the blind horse and turned him. He apologizes and insists the purse go to Midnight's owner. It is his belief Midnight would have finished well out in front had the unfortunate accident not happened."

At this gesture of sportsmanship, the crowd cheered Scruby lustily. The jockey had turned a neat trick.

"It was either an accident, or a dirty trick and he outsmarted us," Mike said. "Either way, we're helpless. If we get tough now the crowd will think we're short sports. Of course, we'll refuse the purse."

"I guess you're right," Ace admitted. "He's outsmarted us all right. But I'm damned if I'll shake hands with him."

"I don't think he'll risk getting near you," said Mike. Then he asked the announcer to inform the crowd Blue Mountain Ranch was declining Scruby's generous offer.

Scruby's shrewd face was a mask as long as the crowd was watching him, but later he met Atwood in Solo's stall.

"Offering the purse to Mike Cotter publicly was the smoothest trick I've seen in years," the breeder said approvingly. "Half the purse goes to you for a sweet afternoon's work. The trouble is, you may have done too good a job. You may have thrown such a scare into the Cotter crowd that they won't back Midnight, hook, line, and sinker in the Winter Mile."

X.

Senator Hardy heaved a sad sigh and tore up five hundred dollars' worth of tickets. "They told me not to bet on Midnight," he muttered, "but I had to go and do it. Well, they'll never hear about it, you can bet your bottom dollar on that!"

"You see what would have happened," Mike said when the senator appeared at the stable. "You'd have lost your money."

"Sure would," the senator agreed. "How's Ace?"

"He took one hell of a jolt," Mike answered. "It's a wonder he didn't break his neck. A doctor is checking him over. Midnight was lucky, too. I was sure he'd break a leg when he hit the rail. We're starting for the coast and the Winter Mile. Did

you catch any time on Midnight while he lasted?"

"I figured he'd have done six furlongs in a minute and eleven seconds, but for the accident," the senator answered. "Ah-hum! The ups and downs of a racing man's life." He sighed heavily.

"So you *did* bet, eh?" Mike accused. "Hell, so did I. Put a hundred dollars on the nose. Couldn't resist the temptation, after all."

Mike left to make arrangements for shipping Midnight. As soon as he had disappeared, Lafe Blodgett stepped into the barn. "Jest come in to see if you were hurt none, Ace," he said. "Mighty mean fall you took."

Ace noticed that his father was dressed in a new suit of gaudy checks. "All slicked up, huh?" he observed. "You must've picked some winners or put a mortgage on the ranch." He studied his father's face closely. "You mortgaged the ranch. That's it."

"Yeah, borried a little money on the place," Lafe admitted. "Figger to git back four-five dollars for every one I borried. Figger to git some good breedin' stock, round up some of the best on our range and git some of the money you claim folks are offerin' fer Blue Mountain country stock."

"That's the talk!" Ace said. "Now how 'bout you and ma? She feels lost without you. And you know you miss her."

"I'm gittin' 'long," Lafe stubbornly contended. "She turned agin' me."

"And you know why," Ace said. "For us kids. But I guess there ain't no use talkin'."

"No use," Lafe agreed. "Figger you can git Midnight in shape for the Winter Mile? I've knowed colts to be plumb ruined by what happened to him today."

"If we put him in the Winter Mile," Ace answered shortly, "it's because Mike Cotter figgers he's *right* and will win."

Lafe wandered off, but Ace remained in Midnight's stall. The hours passed, the grandstand and stables were almost deserted and most of the crowd had returned to town.

Ace sat on a stool talking to Midnight as though the horse could understand him.

"I've heard jockeys claim that things that happened to us today, Midnight, can ruin a horse and a man. Makes 'em afraid to take risks, then they always play safe. Races ain't won playin' safe, Midnight," Ace explained. "Now we're goin' for a ride."

He saddled the blind horse and rode down back roads until he came to a stream. Opening a gate, he led the horse through and closed it carefully behind him.

"There's a good chance, we'll both break our necks, boy," he said, "and it ain't likely Mike Cotter or Gorin would O. K. this, but it's our necks we're riskin'."

Then he put the spurs to the horse. Again and again Midnight tried to stop, but, setting his jaw, Ace forced the horse to do his bidding. There were moments of panic for the horse and near panic for Ace Blodgett. When he found himself wavering, he took a deep breath and continued with his desperate plan.

It was dark when he returned to the stable. He rubbed down the horse, gave himself belated attention and turned in for the night. When he awakened it was daylight and Mike Cotter was packing.

When he saw Ace's face, Mike stared in amazement. "What happened to you, Ace? Your face is all scratched up."

"It's a long story, Mike," the boy answered evasively. "I'll tell you some time. When does our train leave?"

"Ten o'clock," Mike informed him. "Gorin and you are going to ride with Midnight. We'll make a stop at Mesquite Coulee and you'll be able to say howdy to your ma. I sent her a wire."

On the ride to Winter Mile, Mike Cotter rode in a Pullman, watching the range-land scenery flow past the car window, while his mind reviewed the past months. Lafe Blodgett puzzled him. Although there was hate in the man's eyes and he didn't fail to show it when they met, thus far he hadn't attempted to continue the feud, perhaps because he hadn't again caught Mike in feud country. It was more than likely if they met on some remote range Blodgett would open fire immediately.

Mike's own feelings were conflicting. He was aware of a constant struggle between common sense, and an urge to engage in a finish fight with Lafe Blodgett. He was never vindictive, but Midnight's blinding was an ever-present reminder of what Blodgett had done. Yet Mike was fair enough to admit the wounding of the horse had been unintentional. The Blodgetts loved horses as deeply as the Cotters.

He felt Gorin had changed Ace's life when he made the boy believe he was going to kill him that day. And sending Ace out to learn to ride running horses had opened the boy's eyes to what the world had to offer.

Then, taking full advantage of the regret he knew was in Ace's heart because of the blinding of Midnight, Mike had given Ace a big hand in training and riding the horse. He knew that Midnight's helplessness, his gameness, would draw on the best Ace had to give.

"So far, so good!" Mike thought. "But we haven't won any big purses. We haven't seen Midnight leap to the front. The feud isn't settled, Lafe and his wife are at outs, and the feud is still likely to flare up."

As a result of his summing up, Mike was a bit discouraged when the train pulled in to Mesquite Coulee. Dorothy Blodgett, in her neat nurse's uniform, was on the platform, her mother beside her.

The two were standing under a light, but as they saw the baggage car in which Midnight rode, they followed it, losing themselves in the shadows beyond the station.

Mike jumped from the train and overtook them. He caught Mrs. Blodgett's arm and helped her along. "Ace is expecting you. He wasn't hurt in the fall."

Ace jumped down. "Hello, ma," he shouted. "Hi yuh, sis?"

"Did you see yore dad?" the woman inquired eagerly. "Did he say anything 'bout patchin' up our fuss?"

Ace shook his head reluctantly. He walked up the platform with his mother, leaving Mike and Dorothy together.

"I'm not going to kid myself any longer," Mike declared bluntly. "I've missed you like hell. I would have to fall in love with a Blodgett!"

Dorothy looked at him curiously, her eyes mysterious in the night. He thought he saw a softening, a gentleness about her mouth that hadn't been there since that day so long ago when the doctor had said he was out of danger. "Mike, you mustn't talk like that," she cried despairingly.

"Some day I'm going to make you listen," Mike vowed.

"'Some day' has a nice sound," said Dorothy. "Let's leave it that way. Tell me what happened to Ace and Midnight? Was Scruby doing a little dirty work?"

"What do you think? Scruby rides for Atwood, who's a close friend of your father," Mike answered. "It was very important for Lafe Blodgett, Atwood and Scruby to know what would happen if something struck a blind horse across the eyes. Well, they learned the answer."

"And you're still going to run Midnight in the Winter Mile?" the girl asked.

"Yes," Mike answered. "We're going to shoot the works."

"What do you mean?"

"Back the horse with everything we've got," Mike explained. "When the race is over, Mike Cotter will be in the money or there'll be a new owner on Blue Mountain Ranch. I hope you'll be there."

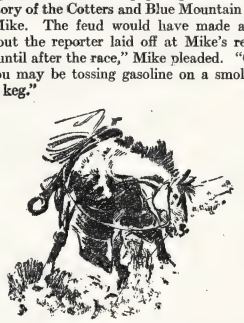
"Nothing could stop me," the girl answered, and her voice was serious and worried. "Mike, the forces we both know so well are gradually building up. Blodgetts watching a great horse, owned by an enemy, ridden by one of themselves. A Cotter with everything bet on his horse, yet knowing an enemy was riding it. Dad and the others betting their shirts on Atwood's horse, or any horse but Midnight. Things can happen that will smash your faith in Ace. You'll lose your head and Ace will lose his, then—an explosion. Mike, the situation is loaded with dynamite."

"I like it," Mike asserted. "Ace will be on his toes. Midnight will be trained so fine he'll be like a razor edge. That's a combination that will produce winners. It makes racing worth while." He put his hand on hers. "I wish you were on my side, Dorothy. What this feud needs is a good horse race—and a wedding."

She laughed. "There never was a practical-minded Cotter, nor a pessimist in the tribe," she said. "The train is starting, Mike. I'll see the Winter Mile. But I hope I won't be needed in my professional capacity."

"Bring your mother along, too," Mike urged. "She deserves to see Ace make his bid for glory." Then he swung aboard the train.

The day Midnight was assigned to a stall, visitors began dropping in. Word had spread rapidly that a great Cotter horse, the first in years, was entering the race. A newspaper sports writer got the history of the Cotters and Blue Mountain horses from Mike. The feud would have made a swell story, but the reporter laid off at Mike's request. "Wait until after the race," Mike pleaded. "Otherwise you may be tossing gasoline on a smoldering powder keg."



The reporter dug up records on blind horses. Perhaps the records were faulty, but he couldn't find one that had won a great race. He doubted if Midnight would take the Winter Mile.

So did many others. Midnight was a forty-to-one shot the day before the race. No one was backing him. That morning Senator Hardy, perspiring from his efforts, his nervousness and the general uncertainty, dropped in on Mike Cotter and Betcha-a-dollar Gorin. Ace Blodgett was there discussing the morrow's race with them.

"I see the smart money is makin' Atwood's Breeze the favorite," said Hardy. "The wise boys figure with Scruby in the saddle, he's sure to win. What do you think, Betcha?"

"Breeze is all right!" Gorin answered. "Trained to the second. But if Midnight can forget his fear, he can finish out in front."

"He sure can," Ace agreed.

"That's all I want to know," Hardy said. "A friend of Atwood's thinks I'm a baby with candy.

He wants to take it away from me. I'm going to give him the chance. I'm betting everything on Midnight's nose."

He departed and Mike looked at Ace Blodgett. "The odds are still forty to one, Ace," he said. "There's a rumor going around that a Cotter is a sucker to trust a Blodgett. That's one reason why the odds are so long. You've heard the rumor?"

"Yeah, I'm supposed to throw the race," Ace answered evenly. "And clean up big because my folks are bettin' on Atwood's Breeze."

"I want you to know how we feel about it, Ace," Mike said. "Betcha and I know you'll ride the best race you know how; and if you can't get a win out of Midnight, no other jockey can. A blood feud is a blood feud. But a horse race is a horse race."

Atwood knocked on Mike's door so soon after the departure of Ace and Gorin that Mike was confident the man had been waiting for them to leave. Atwood greeted Mike genially.

"Don't know you very well, Mike," he admitted. "If you were your father I'd know how to proceed."

"Suppose you work on the theory I'm a chip off the old block," Mike suggested. "I'll never be the man my father was, but I'm doing my best."

"Well, then," Atwood said bluntly, "how much faith have you in Midnight?"

"All that a Cotter ever had in a horse," Mike answered.

"I'll bet you fifteen thousand cash against your equity in your ranch that Midnight doesn't win the Winter Mile."

"That isn't a proposition," Mike declared. "The odds are forty to one."

"The odds are away off and you know it," said Atwood. "If the mortgagee sold your ranch now it's doubtful if he'd get his money back. Your father borrowed money for years in his efforts to develop a winner."

"I know it. But the equity is worth more than fifteen thousand," Mike insisted. "You're offering me practically even money. No dice."

"You don't suppose I'll offer you forty times fifteen?" Atwood protested.

"Hardly. You think the race is in the bag or you wouldn't be here, Atwood," Mike said bluntly. "Put up forty thousand against my equity and it's a deal."

Atwood's response to that was a burst of profanity. He roared, ranted and paced the room. Mike watched him through half-closed eyes. He knew that when Atwood calmed down, he'd meet the terms because the breeder was so confident Midnight wouldn't win.

"All right," Atwood said at length. "If you haven't a ranch, you won't have much use for a horse. I'll bet you either Breeze or Battleground against Midnight. You can pick either one and it'll be a private race between the horse you pick and Midnight. Winning owner to get the other's horse no matter how many other horses finish ahead of them."

"O. K.," Mike agreed. "Midnight against Battleground."

A half-hour later the bills of sale were in the hands of a stakeholder. Atwood was in high glee. He had laid a trap and Mike Cotter had walked into it so easily that there were moments when Atwood experienced sharp twinges of doubt. He was now ready to administer the old double cross.

When the Winter Mile was finished, if all went well, he would hold Mike's equity in Blue Mountain Ranch. He could pay off the mortgage easily. He would also own Midnight. All that remained was a visit to Lafe Blodgett and Ace. He might not be able to add the Blodgett spread to his holdings at one stroke, but he intended that the Blodgetts should be so beautifully trimmed the ranch could be bought for a song.

"Work on a man's greed and hates," Atwood reflected, "and he's a cinch." He was all smiles when he dropped in on Lafe Blodgett. Three of Lafe's younger sons were in the room, but at their father's signal they left the room. "Everything's fixed, Lafe," he said. "Now it won't look good for you to openly bet against Midnight. The stewards will figure Ace threw the race and set him down. There's a betting commissioner I know. I've told him about you. You go to him and bet everything you've got on Breeze; he'll keep it quiet. And keep away from Ace until after the race. We don't want anything that'll look queer and cause the stewards to hold up the purse."

"If I bet everything on Breeze and Breeze don't come in," argued Lafe, "the Blodgetts won't have no ranch."

"And if he does come in," Atwood pointed out, "the Blodgetts will have more money than they've ever seen before. Your enemy is backing his horse to the limit. He won't be under foot after tomorrow night. Well, s'long, Lafe. See you tomorrow night and we'll celebrate. Now don't get scared. Bet your roll right on the nose. You don't get rich betting them to place and show."

"I'm goin' to bet everything, right on the nose," Lafe declared.

He departed and Atwood dropped over to the track to see Scruby. "Well, son," he said, "tomorrow you don't come in first."

"The hell I don't!" The startled jockey shouted. "Why? Ain't Breeze the favorite?"

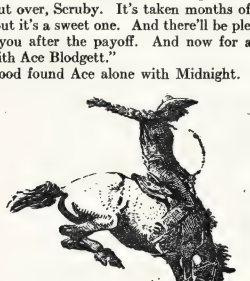
"That's only one reason, son," Atwood explained. "Your job is to stop Midnight from winning."

"Isn't Ace going to pull that horse? Haven't you told him his dad's backing Breeze?"

"Not yet I haven't. Besides, with the Blodgetts backing Breeze, we can't afford to let him win. And there's always a chance Ace might not

pull Midnight in time and he'd finish out in front, so your job is to make sure of the outcome," Atwood continued. "There's something else. Mike Cotter and I have a private bet on Midnight and Battleground. So anyway you look at it, Battleground's got to win." He tucked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, watching the look of comprehension dawn on the jockey's face. "This is probably the smoothest deal and the most profitable I've ever put over, Scruby. It's taken months of planning, but it's a sweet one. And there'll be plenty in it for you after the payoff. And now for a little talk with Ace Blodgett."

Atwood found Ace alone with Midnight. "This



horse is set," Ace said confidently. "How're Breeze and Battleground?"

"They're going to finish one and two," Atwood predicted. "It's too bad you aren't riding for me, Ace. What's Cotter ever done for you? His people have been the enemy of yours for generations. They've kept the old hates burning. And now, through your riding, Mike Cotter expects to win the Winter Mile and go on to the Kentucky Derby. Your old man is made of different stuff. Maybe he's a fool, but he'd rather back some other horse and lose than a Cotter horse and win. It takes fine courage to do that. He's about the last of an old school of dead game sports."

"What horse does dad like?" Ace asked.

"He's borrowed on his ranch to the limit, and he's put the whole works right on Breeze's nose," Atwood answered. "Well—good luck, kid. And may the best horse win!"

XI.

Mike Cotter wondered if he could remain as cool as his father invariably did before a big race. The old man used to puff a big black cigar and tell everyone that, after all, it was only a horse race. And he meant it. If he went broke one year, there was always another chance. Mike smoked one cigarette after another and watched the grandstand fill.

Some of Atwood's party had already arrived in his box, which was near the finish line. Dorothy Blodgett was escorting her excited and bewildered mother to a seat.

Senator Hardy came into Mike's box and seated himself. "Well, Mike, I arrived under my own power, but if Midnight loses I'll be a stretcher case," he said. "The odds on Midnight dropped to twenty to one. Somebody's backing the horse."

"We are," Mike answered, "plus the usual number of sports who like the long shots. If Midnight loses, move over and make room for me on your stretcher. I even bet the horse himself."

"Your dad lost many a good horse that way. And won 'em back again," said Hardy.

Atwood passed the Cotter box on the way to his own. "You wouldn't want to bet your shirt on the outcome, would you, Cotter?" he asked in a loud voice.

Old race-track followers who had known the elder Cotter, stopped their conversation and awaited Mike's answer.

"Sure," the latter retorted promptly. "I'll bet coat, vest, pants, hat, shoes and socks. Bet to be paid publicly and immediately after the race."

Atwood hesitated until someone laughed. "It's a bet," he said hastily.

Mike did not go to Midnight's stall, nor to the paddock. Gorin was taking care of everything, passing along final instructions. Mike had already expressed his absolute faith in Ace, and that was enough. Gorin came presently and sat down. He looked worried.

"Atwood told Ace that the Blodgetts have bet everything on Breeze," he whispered. "Damn it, Mike, something's upset the boy. He's different than I've ever seen him. He was morose and sullen."

"Probably scared stiff at riding his first big race."

"Hope that's it," Gorin said dubiously. "Look, here comes Lafe Blodgett."

They could see Mrs. Blodgett shift over so that her husband could occupy the seat Dorothy had provided for him. The brothers were already seated. Lafe noticed the move out of the corner of his eye, but he continued on to a single seat he had bought.

The horses paraded in front of the stands in single file, turned and entered the starting stalls. Midnight was sweating slightly, his glossy coat glistening in the sunlight of the southern winter day.

Lafe left his seat, walked down the apron to the fence. Mike and Gorin followed just in time to hear him speak to his son.

"You know the kind of a race to ride, Ace," Lafe whispered.

Ace glanced sharply at his father. His face betrayed nothing, but there was a puzzled expression in his eyes. He turned slightly, avoiding his father's intent gaze and saw Mike and Gorin. Then his

mother and Dorothy approached the fence. Atwood, unable to stand the suspense, was also leaving his box.

Midnight was number seven, Breeze five, and Battleground two. As horse number six made a false start, Scruby shouted across the open space. "I'll be careful of my whip this time, old man."

"Yeah, I know you will," Ace said. His eyes were little more than slits. Number six horse was packed into the stall and there was a moment's silence. Then the starter sent them off.

Midnight hesitated a split second as he had done on other occasions, then instinctively swerved over and felt number six rubbing his side. Six shot into the lead and made a bid for the rail. Eight, nine and ten pounded ahead. Ace found himself stirrup to stirrup with Scruby. Battleground was a length ahead, closing in on number six.

Ace saw an opening and started to close in, but Scruby, lashing Breeze, shot ahead. Ace nodded his head sagely. The spurt had taken too much out of Breeze this early in the race. Scruby was no fool and Ace had a hunch Battleground was picked to win. Breeze, the favorite, was to be the fall guy.

A few seconds later, Ace saw a good chance, and Midnight, running beautifully, closed in. The horses spread slightly in the back stretch, but Breeze kept close to Midnight, and the blind horse, feeling a sense of security, slowed down his pace slightly.

"*Yaaaah!* Boy!" Ace shouted. "Now's the time! Right through to the front!"

Again, Breeze swerved, slowed Midnight's onrush slightly, then stayed in close. "*Yaaaah!* Boy!" Ace bellowed again. "Show 'em what you've got! Now!" He gave him a touch of the whip and Midnight responded magically. Then Scruby began lashing his horse. He got him slightly in front of Midnight. Ace, watching, saw the whip slash across his horse's nose. Once, twice, three times, almost faster than the eye could follow.

A shudder ran through Midnight, the shudder Ace knew was the old fear. "*Yaaaah!*" he bellowed. Then the whip fell in a flurry of blows. Midnight shot even with Breeze, then gained a full length.

Scruby, amazed that the three lashes across the blind horse's eyes had failed to check him, now demanded everything Breeze possessed in an effort to slow Midnight. Battleground was five lengths ahead. "Give him a couple more lengths," Scruby thought, "and we don't care what happens."

Breeze drew abreast, hung a moment, faltered and dropped back. Ace missed a jam at the turn, then came into the stretch five lengths behind Battleground and two behind two others.

There was room now. Ace adopted different tactics. His voice grew low, almost a croon. "Faster, boy! Faster! Nice going, boy. Come on! Gimme a little more! A little more. Just a little more!" His words sent a tremor through the driving horse and Midnight closed in some of the distance. The two horses, having made their bid and not having enough reserve, faltered, Ace shot between them. In his ears was the roar of the crowd, stirred by the picture of a blind horse giving everything he had to cross the finish first.

Old-timers found lumps in their throats as the blue and white silks flashed nearer. It had been so many years since a Blue Mountain horse had offered even a poor competition in a big race. They told themselves Midnight would never make it. The Atwood horse was running too beautifully. But they yelled their encouragement to the plucky blind horse.

Bert Atwood, cold as ice and cursing softly, was alternately confident and afraid.

"What's the matter with Scruby?" he rasped aloud. "He should've held that black up longer."

"He'll make it! He'll make it!" Gorin was crying over and over again. "Betcha a dollar he'll make it. Betcha a hundred dollars he'll make it! Betcha a thousand—"

Nobody heard him. Mike Cotter moaned. "I can't watch it! Somebody tell me how it comes out! I can't watch it!" But he was watching it.

His face flushed with excitement. The cords stood out on his neck, as he tried to pull Midnight into the lead with hands clutching great chunks of air. Midnight faltered, but when his rider called for more something deep within him, something only champions possess, responded. He drew abreast of Battleground. Their noses see-sawed back and forth a moment. Battleground tried to gain the lead, then he faltered, and Midnight went over the finish line first by a length.

Mike Cotter started to grab the nearest person and go into a dance of joy. The nearest person was Dorothy standing next to her mother, and Mike grabbed her.

"Did my blind baby go?" he shouted deliriously. "Did he go!"

"Mike!" Dorothy protested quietly. "Right before all these people."

"This isn't a feud! This is a horse race!" Mike shouted. "You've got to let me have my moment. I own Battleground now, too. I own Atwood's clothes. Will you marry me?"

"I . . . I guess it wouldn't do me any good to say no," Dorothy declared. "You Cotters seem to be having a winning streak."

Mike kissed her and, with one arm, drew Mrs. Blodgett into the circle.

"Your boy and my horse did the trick," he told her. "Neither could have won without the other."

"My Ace!" Mrs. Blodgett's eyes filled with tears. "My Ace won before all of them folks. I guess . . . I guess . . . I'm goin' to blubber right out loud." She hid her face on Mike's chest. "Never figgered

I'd blubber on a Cotter shoulder. It ain't fittin'."

"Damned right it isn't fitting!" Mike agreed. He turned Lafe around and shoved his wife into his arms. "Cry on your old man's shoulder. And let him cry on yours. He's just lost his shirt."

"That's another Cotter insult," Lafe shouted. "Guess I'm softenin' up some, ma. Seems kinda nice t' have you lookin' after me ag'in!"

"I'll take your clothes now, Atwood," Mike said to the breeder who looked stunned at the outcome of the race. "I've a pretty good idea what you've been up to. Neither you nor Scruby's tricks could stop Ace and Midnight—"

He broke off as Ace jumped to the ground, ignored the cheering crowd and slashed Scruby three times across the face.

"How do you like your own medicine?" Ace growled. "You stewards can set me down if you want to, but he cut my horse and got away with it."

"I saw the whole thing," a steward said. "I had my glasses on him from the start, watching for something of the sort. We'll give you a good stiff penalty, Ace, for taking matters into your own hands." His eyes twinkled. "Then suspend the penalty."

Ace followed Midnight from the winner's circle to the stable. Lafe and the rest of the Blodgetts trailed along. Mike Cotter brought up the rear with Dorothy. Ace wouldn't talk until Gorin had finished caring for Midnight.

"If it's all right with you, Mike," he said, "I'd like to spend my share of the purse to have Midnight's eyes fixed up. I had an eye specialist check them and he says it can be done."

"So he told me," Mike said. "That's going to be taken care of out of the winnings. You save your money." Mike heaved a sigh as he recalled the race. "When Scruby lashed Midnight I figured we had lost everything."

"And I figgered Scruby would do that and Atwood would shoot the works because he'd be sure Midnight would quit like he done before," Ace explained. "Remember the night I came in with my face all scratched up? That night I rode Midnight at top speed along the creek bank. Willow branches kept strikin' him in the face. Whenever he wanted to quit I'd drive him ahead faster'n ever. Pretty soon he seemed to get the idear no matter what hit his face I wouldn't let anything happen to him. That's why when Scruby hit him, he kept right along goin'." Ace turned to his father. "It was tough on you, dad, bettin' on Breeze. Atwood told me you shot the works."

"Ace, fer two cents I'd give you a hidin'," Lafe Blodgett retorted. "It's true us Blodgetts will drygulch a Cotter, and fill their worthless hides full of buckshot, that's fittin' an' proper. But what Atwood can't seem to savvy—an' it cost him a fortune—and what you seem to ferget is, us Blodgetts never double-crossed hoss nor man, and we always back the hoss a Blodgett owns or rides. The Blodgett fortune was right on Midnight's nose."

"Well, Lafe," Mike declared, "it looks as if we'll both have a couple of places free and clear, with plenty of money left over to breed horses on a large scale. Why not throw in together?"

"I stummicked Ace follerin' yore and Gorin's advice," Lafe answered, "and I'll agree Ace is a better man fer it. I kin even savvy why my ol' woman was fixin' to turn agin' me. I've fergive her and she's fergive me an' now we're two billin' and cooin' doves. But I can't stummick shakin' hands with yuh, goin' pardners with yuh, nor you an' Dorothy gittin' married. But it looks like I'd have to come to all three."

He grasped his wife's arm and started for the door. "All I'm askin', Mike, is to let me git used to things I swore I'd never git used to. Gimme time, Mike, gimme time. Come along, woman, me an' you are goin' to town. I'm goin' to dress yuh up like them wimminfolks we seen at the race today. Throw away that cheap hat; you're going to have the best there is, a ten-dollar one. And here's fifty dollars fer the best fur coat in town."

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Blodgett gasped as her husband hurried her away.

THE END.

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FOURTEEN VOTES BRAND

By T. T. Flynn

I.

Bob Brule had won the Red Rock election by fourteen votes when the last returns came over the mountain from Esmeralda late in the evening.

He was the new sheriff by the skin of his teeth—and fourteen votes—but there were still plenty of people in the Red Rock border country who would have bet bright yellow gold that no young upstart of twenty-three would ever fill the boots of old Dakota Canfield.

Five minutes after the Esmeralda riders smoked in with their returns and whooped for whiskey, Harmony Redfield hammered on the bar of his Buckjack Saloon with a six-gun and shouted for quiet. The noisy crowd hushed expectantly.

Harmony smoothed the bristling gray hair around his pinkish bald spot, pushed his ample stomach against the bar and lifted the gun by the barrel, like a hammer.

"Fourteen votes!" he yelled. "An' they was as good as a million! The house sets 'em up, you right-votin' sons of guns! Crowd in an' grab yore drinks!"

Harmony slammed the bar with his gun and shrill yells turned the celebration loose in front of the long bar.

Bob Brule, wearing his best black suit, stood before the bar shaking hands and feeling a little foolish at being the center of all this attention. And feeling proud and good about it, too.

This welcome, this celebration, was better than the hot bite of whiskey. This took hold of you deep down inside. The hands thumping your back, pumping your arm, the friends, neighbors and strangers who wished you luck, brought a lump into the throat. They liked you, they wished you well, they were behind you.

Bob had promised them a good sheriff, good law if elected. He had promised them the best law the Red Rock country had known for years. Now as he shook the eager welcoming hands, he again promised man after man that, day and night, Bob Brule would be backing up the sheriff's badge that they had voted him.

Nobody mentioned old Dakota Canfield who had lost the election. But each time that Bob thought of Dakota—and he thought of him often—the broad smile and flush of pleasure left his face.

He, Bob Brule, had not been born when Dakota Canfield was first elected the Red Rock sheriff. Twenty-nine long years ago that had been.

Old Dakota had been young Dakota Canfield then. And probably men had crowded around him that first election night as they were crowding around young Bob Brule tonight. They had probably made as much noise and wished Dakota as well.

And back in those days Dakota had deserved it all. Only in these last years, after his wife and son had been killed by an avalanche of spring snow, had Dakota Canfield turned bitter and started to drink heavily.

Folks had been sorry for Dakota, had thought he'd get over it. It seemed as if Dakota had always been the Red Rock sheriff, and always would be. Most of the younger men couldn't remember when Dakota Canfield hadn't been one of the best lawmen in the border country.

But Dakota had just grown more bitter, drunk more heavily, until much of the time he wasn't much good for a sheriff. Friends had tried to reason with him. Dakota had shrugged them aside, grown worse, if anything.

Twice the old-timers had voted Dakota in as usual. And now, tonight, was the end of Dakota Canfield—by fourteen votes.

And here at Harmony Redfield's bar, with the victory celebration roaring out through the swinging doors, Bob Brule wasn't happy when he thought of old Dakota. Dragging down a boyhood hero didn't make a man feel better.

Harmony Redfield chortled across the bar: "Sheriff, how does it feel?" Then, abruptly, Harmony's face lost its broad grin. Sharply under his breath he warned: "Watch yoreself, Bob!"

The celebration was quieting like fire doused by water. Men fell silent, shuffled uneasily; and as Bob

A MAVERICK

Fighting Bob Brule reckoned he won that sheriff's badge in a fair election. But was he the people's choice—or crooked Gurnee Silver's?

followed their glances, he heard a man say: "Hello, Dakota."

There he came through the swinging doors, Dakota Canfield, himself, staggering slightly. He pushed his way to the bar without answering the speaker.

Tall, gaunt and stooped, white-whiskered stubble rough on his face, the old lawman looked harsh, bitter. His suit was wrinkled, his shirt soiled and rumpled.

But the two old wood-handled guns bulked under his coat as usual. The shining sheriff's badge gleamed brave and bright on Dakota's vest, as it had ever since Bob could remember. The slight glassiness in his eyes, the slight lurch were the only signs that Dakota Canfield wasn't himself.

Sheriff by fourteen votes! Dakota said scornfully: "You stole 'em, you slick-eared maverick!"

"Drunk," Bob thought pityingly. "Drunk an' looking for trouble."

A long step from him Dakota stopped. Men nearest them shuffled quietly back, made uncomfortable by the bitter glower on Dakota's face.

Bob, waiting silently, suddenly had the feeling that all the back-slapping, the handshaking, hadn't meant so much after all. Those who had crowded so jubilantly around him were edging away. Their faces were like strangers' faces, blank and watchful as they waited to see what he would do. Trouble was in the air. None of them wanted any of it. They'd voted all trouble to the newly elected sheriff, to Bob Brule.

With a strange, almost lonely feeling, Bob sensed that it would always be that way for a man behind the sheriff's badge. When trouble threatened, the men with the votes, the hearty handshakes, would stand critically back to see what would happen.

Dakota spat scornfully. His voice was thick. "Sheriff, huh? Sheriff by fourteen votes! How many votes did yuh buy an' steal an' have counted twice, yuh slick-tongued young maverick?"

Bob reddened, forced himself to speak without anger. "I don't want any trouble tonight, Dakota. Look me up tomorrow if you still feel the same way."

"Tomorrow, hell!" Dakota said violently. "Gimme an answer now!"

"I ain't answerin' such talk tonight," Bob answered.

"I'm callin' yuh a liar! I'm callin' yuh a thief!" Dakota yelled furiously. "Is that enough to get anything out o'yuh?"

"Not enough to make an argument with you," Bob said coolly.

"Figger yoreself man enough tuh wear this badge, huh?" Dakota said loudly. He jerked the bright star off his vest, hurled it to the floor between them. "Are yuh man enough tuh fight for it? Go fer yore gun, damn yuh! Show these friends of yo'rn what kind of a man they voted for!"

"I was elected," Bob said shortly. "No need of gun work to make it official. If you pull one of them old snap busters, Dakota, I'll be standin' right here with my hands out empty. I ain't got any quarrel with you. I ain't been sworn into office an' I'm not packin' a gun. Pin the badge back. You're still the sheriff."

Dakota flipped out one of his guns. His voice was harsh, grating. "I knowed gun work'd show yuh up! Yuh can buy votes, yuh young pup! But yuh can't buy the kind of stuff it takes to hold down my job. Here's a gun! Here's a chance to show how gutty yuh are!"

Bob stood still, hands at his sides. The crowd watched silently.

Bob had the feeling that he'd suddenly been thrown on trial here. On trial before the whole Red Rock country. These men who had helped elect him were now judging him. Before morning their judgment would be out over the range. Slowly he put his elbows back on the bar, shook his head.

"I won't have any trouble with you, Dakota. Put up that gun."

The old lawman was glaring furiously. Every man in the salon, others crowding outside the swinging doors, had heard Dakota Canfield trying to goad Bob Brule into a fight.

But none of them could see now the baffled, defeated look that crept into old Dakota's bloodshot eyes. All they could see was Bob Brule standing there with his face set, expressionless. Dakota wheeled around to the tense watchers.

"Twenty-nine years I been sheriff!" he said bitterly. "Now I ain't good enough fer a heap of yuh! Yuh sided with a crooked election an' got yoreselves *this!*"

Dakota spat again, jerked a contemptuous thumb back at Bob.

"Well, yuh got him—by fourteen dirty, crooked votes! An' if yuh had any sense yuh'd know where the crooked votes come from! There he is, still wet behind the ears! Half a man when a real man calls him! A hell of a sheriff! An' a hell of a time yuh'll have out of it, those of you who ain't lookin' fer a new bunch to be runnin' these parts! An' now to hell with all of yuh! There's yore sheriff! There's my badge! I'm quittin' now!"

II.

Dakota staggered again as he headed for the swinging doors. But only once. His stooped shoulders were stiff, straight as he strode out.

For a moment Bob had the feeling that the years had been wiped away and once more Dakota Canfield was the tall, formidable lawman he had been long ago.

Then the swinging doors closed behind the old man, and Bob remembered the baffled, defeated look that had come like a tide of despair on the seamed, stubble-covered face. Soberly Bob picked up the badge.

A man near him laughed. Other laughs followed, and derisive comments as men got over their feeling of uneasiness.

"Dakota sure had a snootful."

"Yuh'd think he was married to the job."

"Brule, I thought yuh was gonna take his gun an' call him!"

"You handled him just right, Bob," Harmony Redfield said from across the bar. "He'll get over it."

Bob rubbed the badge clean against his shirt, looked at it a moment and laid it on the bar.

"Give this to Dakota when he's sober. Guess I'll move along, Harmony. It's been a hard day."

"But we ain't started yet," Harmony protested. "Folks want to see you tonight. You ain't gonna back out on the celebratin', Bob?"

"They'll celebrate as high an' handsome without me—after a few more drinks," Bob said with a new twist of cynical insight.

Harmony leaned across the bar and spoke guardedly. "Some of them might not understand it, Bob. They might think Dakota worried you up a little."

"They elected me," Bob said, with a shrug. "I haven't changed. Set up the drinks."

Harmony shrugged, too, and hammered again on the bar with the gun.

"Side up, men! Bob Brule's buying! What'll it be?"

Under cover of the noisy scramble to the bar, Bob walked into the back room—and kept going. Outside in the clear, bright night he paused, thinking. The wind cooled his flushed face, the night peace relaxed his tensed muscles. But there was nothing to bring order to his feverish thoughts.

You could bet some of them would be wondering if Dakota Canfield hadn't backed the new young sheriff down. They'd talk, speculate; the story would twist and grow until all the Red Rock country would be wondering. Chances were that sooner or later some outlaw, some gunman, would decide that old Dakota had been right and would make a test.

A man had come quietly out of the back of the saloon. He joined Bob and spoke guardedly.

"I saw you ease out this way, Brule. You aren't letting that old whiskey soak get under your hide, are you?"

Bob recognized the precise set of the gray hat, the smooth, confident rasp of the voice. This was Arch Hayes, the lawyer, who handled the law as cynically and successfully as he played poker. Once Bob had heard Hayes say that the law was better than poker because you could break the rules easier.

"I'll handle Dakota," Bob said shortly.

"Sure you will. You're smart," Arch Hayes agreed easily. "Have a cigar?"

"Nope."

"I forgot; this is your day to be passing out cigars instead of taking them," Hayes chuckled. He lighted the cigar he had taken from his coat pocket. The match flare showed his eyes narrowed above smiling lips. He fell into step when Bob moved away through the darkness.

"Canfield will stir up talk," Hayes remarked in a confidential voice. "But just remember you're the sheriff. Nobody can do anything about it."

"That," said Bob slowly, "sounds like advice bought an' paid for across your desk."

Arch Hayes chuckled. "The bill won't come to you."

"Will there be a bill?"

"I never worry too much about what'll come up tomorrow," Hayes said easily.

"You don't seem to mind advising about what might happen tomorrow," Bob commented. "You make me wonder who might want to do anything about my being sheriff."

"Dakota Canfield still has friends," Hayes reminded.

"That's right. I'd like to be one of them."

"You have friends," the lawyer said coolly. "We elected you. We'll be backing you all the way."

"Now that's nice."

"It might be nice to know."

"Just who will be backing me up?" Bob asked innocently.

Hayes hesitated. "The La Plata Cattle Co., for one."

They had been walking down the alley, were almost at the cross street when Hayes said that. Bob stopped and peered at the lawyer.

"So it's the La Plata bunch? I couldn't figure who'd have a bill for all this. Maybe you'd better get me straight, Hayes. You'll hear it later, anyway. Gurnee Silver's La Plata Cattle Co. don't an' won't mean any more to me than anyone else. Gurnee Silver will do well to stay around his Mex haciendas over the border if he wants special treatment. I hear that Silver's at the Circle Dollar now. You might take word out to him quick so he won't have any doubt."

"I might—but I won't, Brule. It'll do you no good to let Silver know you're thinking like this."

"I'll tell him myself then!" Bob declared.

"Better not," Hayes advised coolly. "Silver might change his mind. Who do you think put you in office anyway?"

"I figured my friends did!"

The night hid Arch Hayes' face, but his voice was coolly amused.

"Your friends helped some, Brule, but you're a long way from having as many friends as Dakota Canfield. He's had almost thirty years in office to tally friends. You're just getting started. Things like that count in elections. You skimmed by with fourteen votes. If it hadn't been for Gurnee Silver, you wouldn't have had a chance."

Bob swore softly. "So Dakota was right? There *was* dirty work!" He caught the lawyer's coat lapel and jerked him close. "*You* did Silver's dirty work behind my back! *You* made a crook an' a thief out o' me just like Dakota said!"

Arch Hayes did not make the mistake of struggling. He stood with the cigar glowing between his fingers and his coat all bunched up in front. His voice was cynical, amused.

"Don't be a fool. Nobody can prove anything against you. If you hadn't looked like a good man, someone else would have been put in to run against Canfield. And that man would have won. Gurnee Silver wants a good man as sheriff. He figured you were the best bet. You're young. You're set for life if you make the right kind of a sheriff. Isn't that what you want?"

"What kind of a sheriff?" Bob asked in a strangled voice. "I'll tell you, damn you! *Your* kind of a sheriff—with Gurnee Silver's blindfold over my eyes an' your hobbles on my feet! Damn you both! A loaded six-gun couldn't settle what you two have done to me today!"

His right fist smashed into Hayes' mouth. The blow made a squashed soggy sound and the jolt of it went clear back to Bob's shoulder as the lawyer sprawled on the ground.

Hayes rolled over, came up to a knee. His voice, low and strangled, shook with rage and sounded thick, as if his lips were mashed and numb.

"I've got a derringer here! Put a hand toward me again, Brule, and I'll kill you!" He staggered to his feet, backed off a step. A shrill note of wild fury blazed in his voice. "You damned young fool! I ought to kill you, anyway! Maybe it'll have to be done! But I'll give you a chance to think it over! And listen to me, Brule! If you've got a fool idea of making a move about this tonight, remember there's no proof to back you up! I'll deny all knowledge of it and there'll be enough men to swear that *you* paid them for their votes! *You*, damn you!"

Hayes choked, sounded as if he were spitting

blood from his mouth. The same shrill note of fury made a raw edge to his voice.

"You'll take the blame for any talk you start! If you get some sense, I'll still show you how you're lucky to be sheriff! Now stand there while I leave!"

He backed toward the street. There wasn't any doubt that he'd shoot at the slightest excuse. But he needn't have worried. Bob Brule stood there feeling sick and helpless.

Hayes was right! They'd set a crafty trap and sprung it cleverly. Who would believe now that Bob Brule hadn't known all about the crooked work that had won him the election? Who'd believe he had taken that tongue lashing from old Dakota when it wasn't true?

Hayes was gone now. The clear night seemed darker, abruptly lonely. Bob had been lonely before this, lonely many times since the days when he was only a button out on Dee Kline's Running M outfit. But there had always been friends. Now how many friends would there be when word spread that Bob Brule had crooked old Dakota Canfield out of the election?

III.

The Gunsight Hotel bar was crowded, too. The noisy clamor was spilling out open windows. Some of the bunch in there would be celebrating Bob Brule's victory. Some would not. Bob didn't want to see any of them. He entered the hotel from the rear and walked up the back stairs to his room.

A look in the mirror as he pulled off his black coat showed his face set and pale. The smear of crimson on his knuckles would be from Arch Hayes' smashed mouth.

Bob dipped water into the tin washbasin, washed the hand, shucked out of the suit into Levis, leather vest and old coat. From a drawer he took a scuffed gun belt and an old wooden-handled six-gun.

Dee Kline had given him the gun on his fourteenth birthday.

"Yore old man was handy with this un," Dee had said. "But the last time he drawed, he was a mite too slow. You better learn all about it early, bud. A fast gun hand never hurt any peaceable man—but it's shore helped many a one."

Some of the cartridge loops were empty. From a box of cartridges in the same drawer, Bob filled the empty loops, dropped the rest into his pocket. Then he left the black suit hanging in the room, left the hotel by the back way again, and cut over to Tom Shade's stable, where his rifle, saddle and horse were.

Tom Shade wasn't around. The hostler was a shifty-eyed Mexican called Pacho.

Talk said Pacho was a heavy gambler among the local Mexicans, winner most of the time, and a bad man with a knife. Bob had never liked him.

Now Pacho lounged under a smoky lantern in the stable doorway and grinned. "How eet feel to be the new shereef, Señor Brule?"

"I ain't sheriff yet," Bob said briefly. "But after I am, hombre, don't drag your knife in a fight. It'll be the *carcel* for you fast."

Pacho showed white teeth in a wider grin. "Oh, *si*. I am leetle white woolly lamb now. *Verdad?*"

"I ain't sure just what you are," Bob told him curtly. "Bleatin' about it tonight won't make up my mind. Saddle my horse."

Pacho lingered with a thin smile.

"I vote for you, señor. *Mi compañeros* vote, too. We all don' forget that, no?"

An hour back Bob might have grinned, thanked Pacho. Mexicans born north of the border voted as good as any man. Now Bob's eyes narrowed. Arch Hayes had put the meaning of Pacho's sly look into words. The anger on Bob's face sent the hostler back an uneasy step.

"Saddle the horse!" Bob said thickly.

"*Si, si!*" Pacho snatched down the lantern and hurried back into the cavernous barn.

Slowly Bob opened his fists. Arch Hayes had done this to him! Backed by the La Plata outfit, Arch Hayes had fixed it so that a shifty Mexican could grin knowingly at Bob Brule.

Whipping the Mex wouldn't help. Make it worse if anything. Bob made his decision standing there, and turned on his heel. He walked with long, angry strides to the corner and turned toward the Gunsight Hotel.

A joyous waddy yelled loudly, crashed gunshots toward the stars from the middle of the street. Watchers smiled or ignored the shooting. Red Rock was celebrating.

Bob wondered how many in town knew what Arch Hayes knew. How many suspected and would never say? He couldn't be sure who was his friend now, and who was just stringing along with the new sheriff.

The wild drum of hoofs entering Red Rock from the north, wilder yells, blasting crescendo of hand guns, swung Bob around to watch. He had an idea who was coming. He was right.

They came out of the night with a rush, yelling, emptying their guns. Eight or nine riders, closely bunched, range-blackened by sun and wind, hard, fit, sure of themselves. No ranch in all the Red Rock country could send a better bunch of men to town. Top hands all, forking fine horses, fine saddles, dressed colorfully.

They were La Plata Co. men. Gurnee Silver's men, brought north from his ranches in Old Mexico. Scratch any one of them and you'd find a top rider and gunman. You'd find a man who knew he was good and was ready to prove it at the drop of a hat.

They were like Gurnee Silver himself, bold and sure of themselves. Men who rode for Gurnee Silver had to have some of that hard-bitten, two-fisted

drive which had sent Silver himself as a young man over the border with his guns and horse to marry the daughter of a small Spanish *haciendado;* and had carried Silver on to wealth and property such as few Yankee cowpunchers had ever collected.

Only Gurnee Silver could tell how he'd gotten the ranches, the cattle, the mines and other properties he now owned. The great, laughing, domineering hulk of him had found Mexico to his liking. He had gotten what he wanted and held it with hard-fisted fighting ownership. His son, Tony Silver, was a copy of what the old man must have been in his younger days.

Two years back, Gurnee Silver had looked at the changing times and decided he needed grass north of the border. His La Plata Co. had bought Red Rock land and started to expand.

No man had sold his property to the La Plata Co. for less than it was worth. There was agreement about that. But when a man refused to sell, he found himself in trouble. Fences down, haystacks burned, border jumbers running off his stock.

No one could prove that Gurnee Silver's hand touched any of the trouble. Silver himself spent most of his time south of the border. Those ranchers who came to the point of selling got dollar for dollar for all they'd owned before trouble hit them. They got their money from Arch Hayes, the Red Rock lawyer, or a laughing, booming, self-confident Tony Silver, who had been put in charge of the new La Plata holdings.

This year a great ranchhouse had been started out on the La Plata land. There were rumors that Gurnee Silver had gotten in bad with the Mexican *politicos* and was getting out while he could. All kinds of talk. Meanwhile the La Plata holdings were growing fast, the big ranchhouse was almost done, Gurnee Silver, his wife and daughter had come north with a wagon train of household furnishings and personal effects to install in the big house.

Tonight Tony Silver led the La Plata riders in their wild ride to the Gunsight rack. His booming laugh lifted above their loud talk as they hitched in the dust of their coming and swaggered inside.

Few greetings were given them by the Red Rock men standing about. Bob noted more than one scowl after the La Plata men had disappeared inside. A man sighted Bob, whooped and grabbed for his hand.

"Howdy, sheriff! We been lookin' for you! It's your night to get ory-eyed!"

Bide Miller was the speaker, a bluff, good-natured young fellow who ranched the Bar W, to the south along the Big Chipaya Draw. Others were feeling the same way Bide did, reaching for Bob's hand, slapping his back.

"I'm too busy right now, boys," Bob told them. "Anybody seen Dakota Canfield?"

Bide Miller threw him a quick inquiring look. "Canfield?"

"That's right."

They'd all heard about his brush with Dakota. You could see them wondering if there were going to be trouble, after all. Bide shrugged.

"Dakota was down the street a couple of hours ago," he said. "It'd be a guess where he is now. Might be inside. Have a look an' a drink with the boys, Bob. It ain't every night we're drinkin' to luck like this."

Andy Anderson, the fat, mournful little bookkeeper in the bank, and owner of shares in several small bunches of cattle, said: "Luck ain't a name for it, Bob. We're lookin' for you to hang a spade bit on some of these border dodgers that have been raising hell around these parts lately."

Bob nodded gravely. "I said I would, Andy—if I put on the sheriff's badge. I'll look in here for Dakota and have that snifter. Maybe it'll wash some of the dust out of my eyes."

"Dust in your eyes?" Andy joked.

"That's right," Bob said with a touch of the new grimness that he'd been trying to keep from them. "I'll buy the drinks, men."

That was enough to bring them trouping noisily inside. The barroom was crowded. The bar lined with men. Bob looked around while drinks were being ordered. Dakota was not in sight.

"Seen Canfield lately?" Bob called to the barkeep who was setting out bottles and glasses.

"Not short of an hour," the man shrugged. "Oughta see him in here most any time now. He's makin' the rounds tonight."

Tony Silver and his La Plata men were bunched near the center of the bar. And it was Tony Silver who turned, laughing, with a whiskey glass in his hand.

"Forget Canfield, Brule! He's done! You're the hombre who counts now! Side us in a drink! We're for you!"

He had the blue eyes and laughing bulk of the graying giant who was his father. And he had black hair and a fine-drawn litheness that must have come from his Spanish mother.

The Spanish in this Tony Silver might account for the dusty white sombrero, the gaudy embroidery on his leather vest, the big-rowled Mexican spurs of hand-beaten white silver. His manner seemed to take it for granted that the new sheriff would be glad of approval, glad to drink.

"Drink with *you?*" Bob said with a rush of tight-lipped bitterness. "Hell, no! I ain't got that low yet!"

IV.

It took a second for men around them to realize what had been said. Tony Silver himself kept smiling for an instant. Then explosive tension struck every man within hearing. Those nearest Bob be-

gan to edge away. The La Plata riders around Tony Silver moved out in hard-eyed watchfulness.

The La Plata men weren't looking for trouble from Bob Brule. They were leaving him to Tony Silver and were watching the other men in the barroom. Like a wolf pack facing all who did not run with them, Bob thought.

The quick silence spread to the far corners of the room. Nervous movements of the crowd were not loud enough to cover the sound of Tony Silver's drink pouring on the floor. Then the glass made a sharp little impact on the wood and rolled away. Silver's smile was suddenly an angry scowl.

"You're a damn talky *pelado*, Brule!" he said roughly. "Shuck off that gun! Let's see what's back of your talk!"

His hand started to his gun belt. Bob's hand was on his gun before he saw that Silver wasn't drawing. A sneer spread on the young man's dark, handsome face as he unbuckled the belt and handed it to the La Plata man on his right.

"Don't be so jumpy, Brule! I'm only going to whip some manners into you!"

That was the hot rough blood of Gurnee Silver that took what was wanted because its owner wanted it.

Bide Miller muttered a warning just back of Bob's shoulder.

"I've heard he's hell in a fight, Bob! Don't let him egg you into it!"

Bob thrust his belt and gun back to Bide without answering. No one paid any attention to the bartender's protests. Tony Silver swept his white sombrero behind him and leaped, striking hard.

He was half an inch taller, pounds heavier, faster than the bulk of him looked. He missed the first blow, plunged into Bob, slammed the other fist against Bob's cheek as they stumbled across the room.

"Anyone who butts in gets hurt!"

That shout came from the La Plata *segundo*, Hooker McReady, who had come north with the first La Plata men. The warning was not needed. Nobody was interfering. Men backed against the walls and bar to watch the fight raging across the room.

Bob took a blow on the chest that stopped his breath. He smashed a fist to Silver's mouth. They circled and jumped at each other again. Silver's mouth was bleeding. Wild anger flared on his face as Bob hit him twice more and jumped back.

"Show him, Bob!" Bide Miller yelled.

Bide's yell was still in the air when Silver closed with a rush of fury that beat Bob's guard down, carried him stumbling back against chairs and a table. The chairs went over, the table reeled back. A smash knocked Bob stumbling to the floor.

As soon as Bob hit the floor, Tony Silver leaped in to stomp him.

Tony Silver bellowed, jumped to stamp him. Bob rolled desperately. The Silver temper was raging, and it was doubtful whether Tony Silver now knew or cared what he was doing.

A boot just missed Bob's head. Sharp spur rowels slashed his cheek. Then as he rolled, his hand caught a table leg, slung the table against Tony Silver's hip. That gave him a moment to scramble up, to back off with the bite of pain in his slashed cheek clearing his head.

Bellowing again, Tony Silver dashed the table aside and plunged after him. The man was muscular, fast, more dangerous even than he had seemed. Bob dodged—and then came back as Tony Silver whirled after him.

A hard right knocked Tony Silver back on his heels. Bob followed it up with a left and another right, grunting with the desperate effort of the

blows. He knew he was done if Tony Silver got him down again, through as sheriff anyway, branded crooked in all the years to come by the Silvers and Arch Hayes.

The bitter fire of it drove him after Tony Silver now, sledging blow after blow that kept Silver off balance, carried him back and back the length of the long barroom.

Tony Silver had stopped bellowing. They were both silent, save for gasping breaths and grunts as they hit and were hit back. The crowd was silent, too, as all eyes riveted on the fight raging down the room.

Some of the men might have sensed that this was more than a barroom fight. This was the first time the Silvers had been challenged openly in the Red Rock country. This was as good as old Gurnee Silver himself being battered before their eyes.

Tony Silver was too raging stubborn to dodge, too groggy to catch balance and make a stand. Step by step, he went back before the smashing, slashing blows that had no end.

Both men were tiring fast. It couldn't keep up. Tony Silver's face was battered, bloody. Bob was bloody, too. His arms felt numb, strength was leaving his body.

Hooker McReady's harsh voice sounded far off. "There's been enough of it! Stop 'em both!"

"You wanted it this way!" Bide Miller charged angrily. "I'll pull a gun on the man who butts in!"

The angry cries of assent meant little to Bob. The ranks of men crowded back against the walls, the barroom itself had vanished from his vision. Only Tony Silver's cut, bleeding face before him mattered; that face at which he was throwing fists as fast as weary arms would move. He was hit back, but he was past feeling the blows.

Men standing before the swinging doors got out of their way. Tony Silver staggered back through the doors into the hotel lobby where others had gathered, and still more were coming in from outside as news of the fight spread.

Tony Silver rocked on weaving legs and swung wildly. He missed. Bob hit him again with all his strength. The sodden shock of the impact went through his body. Tony Silver reeled around and fell hard. Sobbing for breath, he tried to crawl to hands and knees.

"Stomp him, Brule, like he tried to stomp you!" someone yelled.

A swirl of skirts darted in front of Tony Silver's blood-smeared face. Bob looked up dizzily into the delicate oval of a girl's face that was flushed with anger and scorn as she cried at him.

"Don't dare try it! He's helpless! Can't you see he's helpless?"

The big man who swung her away from the spot by an arm addressed her in a cold, angry voice.

"Keep out of this, Judith! Your brother don't need to hide behind a woman's skirts!"

He must have been watching, Gurnee Silver himself! Gray was in his mustache and hair. He wore fine riding boots and an expensive broadcloth suit. The gun that talk said never left him showed an ivory handle inside the open coat. Blue eyes in a dark-tanned face were coldly challenging.

"Finish it!" Gurnee Silver ordered as he stepped back.

Tony Silver was staggering up again, shaking his head dazedly.

"He's had enough!" Bob panted.

Gurnee Silver's rage showed itself in a roar. "Who said he's had enough? Tony, are you through?"

Tony Silver replied by staggering forward. And Gurnee Silver stood there like a man of rock while Bob smashed one final blow that reached Silver's chin. This time Tony Silver sprawled limply on the floor.

V.

Bob caught Judith Silver's eye. Pale as she was and hurt over the hurt of her brother, she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in Red Rock. She had the delicate mark of her Spanish blood, the blue eyes of her father and brother. Her look at Bob had the cut of a riding whip.

"Going to stomp him?" Gurnee Silver demanded harshly.

"No!" Bob said thickly.

Gurnee Silver's face was still hard and expressionless as he called to his *segundo*.

"McReady, when Tony can walk, start him home. He's had his town fun for tonight."

Bob turned to leave. Silver's voice stopped him. "You're the new sheriff, they tell me."

"Dakota Canfield's the sheriff, damn you!" Bob said bleakly. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"No," denied Gurnee Silver. His face remained rock-hard, did not change expression when Bob shouldered past him toward the stair, ignoring the men who would have spoken to him.

Bide Miller hurried after him.

"Glory be! You shore made a mess of him, Bob! I wasn't lookin' for you to do it!"

"He's game, for a low-down skunk," Bob mumbled through split lips as they started up the stairs. "What'd he do to me?"

"You look like a trail herd stampeded over you," Bide admitted after a critical look. "Lemme help you. "Guess yo're dead on yore feet."

"I'll do," Bob said. "Look around town for Dakota Canfield, will you? Soon as I'm washed up, I want to see him."

"More trouble?"

Bob grinned crookedly as they paused at the top of the stairs. "You might say so. It won't be a fight, though."

"None of my business," Bide shrugged. "Where'll I find you?"

"I'll wait in my room."

"Good idea," Bide agreed. "You stamped in a nest of rattlers when you whipped old Silver's son. Ain't you heard talk how Gurnee Silver figures the sun rises an' sets in that wild young bull of hisn?"

"Damn all the Silvers!"

Bide shook his head. "You're sure proddy about 'em. For no reason at all you pick a fight with the whole La Plata bunch. An' they stay on the prod, ready for trouble. No telling what would have happened if they all hadn't figured you'd get stomped short and fast." Bide shook his head again. "It ain't the easiest way to start out being sheriff. There's trouble ahead. Wasn't a month ago that Tully Williams had half his cattle run off, and gave up and sold to Gurnee Silver."

"I know," Bob said. "Williams got all he figured the place was worth, didn't he?"

"Did you talk to Tully about it?" Bide countered.

"No," Bob admitted.

"You've got some to learn, even if a lot of us figure you'll make a good sheriff," Bide Miller said with a darkening face. "Bob, Tully Williams came there by Sand Creek thirteen, fourteen years ago. Fenced his water with his own two hands. Built the house himself. His wife helped run their little bunch of cattle the first couple of years. Their kids was born there. They nursed up the beef herd, fenced more land, built more on the house, an' got the place fixed like they wanted it to grow old on. They liked the country and the friends they had. They wasn't interested in gettin' what the place was worth. Tully an' his missus had things there that money wouldn't buy them. An' then they had to sell out, pull up an' start all over again somewheres else."

"Too bad," Bob said heavily.

"It's worse'n that!" Bide Miller growled with sudden passion. "It's got to be stopped! Damn Gurnee Silver an' the money he's willing to pay for a man's home! We've all got a right to ranch and live like we want without being crowded out an' bought out by a half-Mex land hog who's took a fancy to our homes."

"That's right," Bob agreed.

"Sure it's right!" Bide said passionately. "That's a how-come you got so many votes! I ain't the only one who's expecting trouble. Tully Williams wasn't the last one that's gonna be forced out. Gurnee Silver ain't got half the land he wants. Arch Hayes has said so. We need a sheriff from now on who'll hit the saddle when trouble shows up and keep going until this country is bad medicine for trouble makers."

He struck a hard fist into a rough palm and went on harshly:

"We aim to keep the homes we've got! There'll be enough of us to back you up! If it means a showdown fight with Gurnee Silver an' those hard cases who ride for him, we'll side you on it!"

"Your land is next to the ranch that Tully Williams sold," Bob murmured thoughtfully.

"I had my offer before Tully got his," Bide said grimly. "I'm lookin' for trouble any time. And if it happens, and you ain't took over the sheriff's office yet, ride like you are the sheriff. There'll be enough of us to back you on it. We're finished with old Canfield—an' he's give public notice he's through with the office. I rode in today to see how you made out an' to have a talk with others about what's to be done."

"I'm not the sheriff," Bob said soberly. "I won't be the sheriff. I'll ride with any of you small ranchers who set out to stop this trouble. But I'm giving the election back to Dakota as soon as I get him sober enough to understand cold talk."

"You got punched crazy in that fight!" Bide said violently.

"I was looking for Dakota before I ran into Silver."

"It don't make sense!"

"Plenty of sense," Bob said bleakly. "To me, anyway."

"By damn," said Bide, staring, "are you gettin' cold feet over Gurnee Silver an' those La Plata riders?"

"Call it that if you want to."

"I'm not callin' it that!" Bide snapped. "But there's plenty who will! You're double-crossing the men who counted on you! They could have tried to elect someone else! Now there ain't a chance! They'll be worse off than ever if you run out an' give it back to old Canfield!

"It's got to be that way, Bide."

"Then I'll get my say in before anyone else!" Bide exploded. "Either you've been bought by Silver or you've turned yaller! To hell with you, you dirty double-crossin' skunk! And if you want to stay healthy, get out of these parts on the run! Every man you've throwed down will be itchin' to take a sight on you!"

"I'll be around," Bob said quietly, but Bide Miller was already going down the steps two at a time, his face black with anger.

Bob swore heavily under his breath. He went to his room, scowled at what he saw in the mirror, poured out more water, and did the best he could in the way of repairs.

He still looked bad enough when he left the room and went down through the front of the hotel. The Silvers were gone. A man or two nodded. Several grinned crookedly. Others stared with bleak hard faces as he walked out. Bide Miller had spread the word fast.

Groups of men stood around out front. Most of them cowmen, many of them men who had promised him their votes. A strained quiet fell over

them as Bob appeared, and he knew they had been talking about him.

Bob nodded at them and turned toward the feed barn—and sensed as he did so that he was going to be stopped. Ed Vance, who was partner with Andy Anderson in a small beef herd, was the one who blocked his way. Vance's short dark beard hid the look on his face, but his manner was surly, his voice harsh.

"What's this we hear about yuh givin' the election tuh Canfield?"

"You heard it all, I reckon, Vance."

"*You* ain't heard it all, though!" the rancher said angrily. "I didn't believe it, but I guess it's so! Yuh've sold us out, Brule, throwed us over! Why, damn yore dirty—"

"Git out of the way, Vance!" Bob warned. "I'm in a hurry an' I've had all the fight I want tonight!"

But Ed Vance stood there, burly, hard, threatening, and his voice lifted furiously.

"He's in a hurry, men! Rushin' around to get shut of everything an' leave us holdin' the bag! Are we gonna lay back an' get laughed at? Gonna let this smart jack deal us from the bottom of the deck an' ease off grinnin' to hisself? He never had no intention from the first of sellin' us anything but a double cross!"

"His neck oughta be stretched!" called someone back in the shadows.

It was like a spark to powder. Another voice yelled: "Who's got a rope!" Someone else took it up: "Run him out o' town an' call it good riddance!"

Bob wouldn't have believed it possible. Some of these men had shaken his hand, slapped his back, wished him well only an hour ago. Now they were ugly and close to a point where a lynching would seem reasonable.

Bob started forward. Ed Vance pushed him roughly back and drew his gun. He never knew what happened next. Not more than a man or two around the spot saw Bob's gun streaking from the holster, barrel flashing up into Vance's dark beard. The sodden impact of the blow wasn't audible. Vance made no sound as he collapsed.

VI.

Bob grabbed the nearest man by the shoulder, buried the gun muzzle in his ribs and backed against the front of the hotel. "Stand back, you fools!" he shouted at the crowd of men. "Do you want a killing here?"

"What happened to Vance?"

"He kilt Vance!"

"Hell, there wa'n't no shot!"

But men fell back from the threat of Bob's gun, milled uncertainly from the spot where Ed Vance lay crumpled and motionless.

"Stand still!" Bob grated at the man he held for a shield. It was Obie Peters, a cheerful, good-natured waddy, who had turned as sullen and threatening as the others. "Vance'll be all right!" Bob said harshly. "Git back while I walk Obie down the street! There won't be a hangin' tonight without a shootin' first! It ain't worth it if you got any sense left to think! Git back! I'm walking!"

Someone in the growing crowd cursed him. But the men nearest his iron kept hands away from their guns and held back. They needed a leader and no one was willing to take Ed Vance's place.

A prod with the gun started Obie Peters walking. The men ahead of them fell away and they got clear of the crowd.

"Yo're done in Red Rock, Brule! Keep goin'!" someone called contemptuously.

But no one followed them. They reached the corner, turned toward the feed barn. Bob took Obie's six-gun.

"I'll leave this at the stable, Obie," he said. "Tell them I don't blame them. I feel worse about this than they do. Maybe Dakota Canfield'll have something to say after I see him."

"T'hell with old Canfield!" Obie said violently. "You've said all there is to say, Brule! I wisht they'd stretched yore dirty neck! Red Rock country ain't for you after this! Better keep ridin'!"

He vanished back around the corner. Bob went on to the livery stable. His horse was tied by the door, gun in the saddle leather. Pacho, the Mexican, stood there with a furtive watchfulness as Bob swung into the saddle.

"You are the shereef now, señor, no?" Pacho asked meekly.

"I ain't the sheriff," Bob rasped. "Canfield's the sheriff an' he'll keep on being sheriff. What's on your tricky mind?"

"*Nada,* señor, nothing. But I t'ink if you are shereef like Señor Canfield say w'en he ride away leetle while ago, maybe you better know how he swear when I spik your name. Maybe hees not mean so good—"

"Wait a minute!" Bob broke in. "Did Canfield git his horse an' leave?"

"*Si.*"

"Where'd he go?"

Pacho shrugged, gestured vaguely to the west. "That way, Señor Brule. Weeth hees pack horse an' guns." He lifted his hands. "*Caramba,* hees face look black *y malo.* Nevair I see heem look so."

Bob looked down at the dark sly face that was seeking favor with the new sheriff. Old Dakota, he knew, kept a saddle horse, pack horse, and a trail pack here at the feed barn ready for quick riding. In past years he had often used them when riding after law breakers.

Now Dakota was gone again. It was a good guess that he'd shaken Red Rock dust from his feet for good. Others might have laughed at the idea,

but Bob remembered that baffled look of defeat and despair on Dakota's seamed old face.

"He say when he was coming back?" Bob demanded of the hostler.

"No, señor."

"An' didn't say where he was going?"

"No."

Bob fished three dollars from his pocket, flipped them to Pacho for the stable bill. He rode out of the doorway into the west. No telling where Dakota was heading or when he'd stop. And he had to be caught, brought back.

"It'll be a hell of a note," Bob said aloud with wry bitterness, "if Dakota keeps going an' there ain't any sheriff left for Red Rock."

West out of Red Rock the narrow, dusty road struck across the rough open country toward the Horsehide Hills, and on beyond the Horsehides to the Paloma Mountains, where a man could ride through the high timber and brush until descending valleys and canyons took him across the border into Old Mexico.

Out this way a score of trails and branching wagon ruts fanned out into the ranch country. Dakota Canfield knew them all. One guess was as good as another as to which way he'd go. There wasn't a moon to read sign, nor would it have helped much. Ranch riders passed too often over the road.

Riding at a lope, Bob tried to put himself in the old sheriff's mind. Where would a man head in Dakota's place? Would he want to see anyone he knew or try to keep off by himself? The more you thought about it that way, the less answer you got.

Dismounting, Bob struck some matches, tried to read the road sign. A stiff sound wind blew the matches out, but it looked like the fresh tracks of two horses had come this way. He rode on for another hour and looked again where the road ruts crossed the white dry sands of the Arroyo Seco. And when all but two of his matches were gone, he was certain the fresh tracks had not come this far.

One of the remaining matches lighted a cigarette; and after smoking a moment, Bob followed his hunch. South another hour's ride was Dee Kline's Running W Ranch. Dee, another old-timer, had been in the Red Rock country almost as long as Dakota. And even if Dee hadn't seen anything of Dakota, he'd have advice for Bob Brule, who'd come to the Running W as a fatherless button and still looked on it as home.

It was after midnight when Bob rode up to the familiar old ranchhouse and stiffly dismounted. Sam and Samson, the two big dogs, barked furiously until they got his scent and came forward sniffing and whining.

Windows were lighted in the ranchhouse, which was unusual for this time of night. Dee Kline stepped out, heard who it was and chuckled.

"Yuh got out here quick with the good news, Bob. Slim Jim rode in a couple hours ago an' said it was all over but the shoutin'. So yuh growed up to be a sheriff?"

They were in the big beamed living room now, and Dee Kline stood there in the lamplight, small and wiry for all of his white hair, with a faint smile on his shrewd kindly face.

"Yore hoss must 'a' throwed yuh," he commented as he took in Bob's battered face.

"Two-legged horse name of Tony Silver," Bob told him briefly.

Dee whistled soundlessly. "Startin' off with raw meat, ain't you, son?"

Bob rolled another cigarette. He was stiff, sore, tired and dispirited. It was easy to slip back into the role that had existed between that friendless button and old Dee Kline.

"I ain't starting off, Pop," he said heavily. "I've been run out of Red Rock. They were itchin' to get a rope around my neck. I ain't the sheriff an' I never will be now."

Dee stepped to a cupboard set in the thick adobe wall, turned back with a bottle and two glasses. "A little of this'll help, son. Sit down an' git it off yore chest."

He listened gravely to Bob's account of what had happened during the evening. "What else could I do?" Bob finished bitterly. "Arch Hayes an' Gurnee Silver made a crook out o' me before I knowed what was happening. Wasn't nothing to do but back out an' let Dakota have it."

"You did right," Dee nodded. "But yuh played the wrong card in not tellin' Bide Miller why yuh was throwin' up the office. Can't blame Bide an' the men who voted fer yuh fer thinkin' yuh gave them a raw deal."

"Gurnee Silver's the only one I'm blaming, Pop. I thought I could find Dakota quick, get him sobered up, an' mebbeso both of us let everyone in Red Rock know what had happened."

Dee leaned forward, cupping his empty whiskey glass. His eyes were narrowed and shrewd.

"Yuh wasn't by any chance hopin' to get Dakota sobered up like his old self so they'd take kindly to him?"

Bob smiled sheepishly. "He's been a better sheriff than ever I'd be, Pop. He could be again for another term."

"Uh-huh," Dee agreed. "The hard-headed old idjit oughta have it, too. When he quits, he oughta quit proud an' on his own say-so." Dee set his empty glass on the floor and rubbed his gnarled hands together slowly. "Yo're still young, Bob. It's all ahead of yuh. Big things—if yuh make them big. An' they won't be big if yuh don't stay big inside. This trouble'll settle down some way. A young feller's life ain't smashed up by one mistake, especially when he's in the right about it."

His chair creaked as he reached for the bottle. "Dakota's lived through the big years, son. Done purty well, too. Had a right to be proud of hisself. Us old-timers watched him keep the law in these parts when it was a man-sized job. Injuns an' cut-throat *pelados* from across the border, renegade whites an' plain cussed outlaws swarmed through this Red Rock country lookin' for easy pickin's. Dakota put the fear of the law in' em. An' then times changed an' he could take it easy with his family an' look back an' be proud of all he'd been through."

Dee sighed and poured another drink. "Losin' his wife an' boy busted Dakota up. Old codgers like us live a heap in the past, son. Dakota got so he just didn't give a damn about today as long as he could stay likkered up, livin' in the past with his wife an' son an' them wild years when he was cleanin'.up the Red Rock country. It wasn't right. Dakota knowed it, but he had enough stiff-necked pride in what he'd been to think folks would still want him."

"Enough of them did," Bob said.

"Dakota don't know it," Dee said, smiling faintly. "His eyes got opened with a bang today. He didn't like what he saw, either—an' bein' the stiff-necked old mossyback he is, he hated hisself an' everybody who's snatched the last of his pride away. He pulled freight out o' Red Rock lookin' fer trouble an' not carin' where he met it."

Bob made a mistake about Judith Silver—she'd said she would shoot, and she did!

Bob looked sharply at the old man. "Seems to me you know aplenty about Dakota for a man who ain't left the ranch today, Pop."

Dee emptied his glass and grinned. "Dakota come by here, son, a-pawin' an' a-snortin' about what a crooked, two-faced young rascal I brang up an' sent to Red Rock to lie an' steal an election. We liked to tangled over it before I got the straight of what happened. An' then after I cussed Dakota out an' he cussed me 'n' you both out, he rode on fer devil-knows-where, lookin' for more trouble. What you aim to do now, Bob?"

"Find Dakota," Bob answered. "I ain't wanted around Red Rock now. They ain't got a sheriff. Dakota has got to go back an' take what he won fair an'

square." He shrugged. "An' then I'll look around."

"Look around, huh?" Dee repeated. "What might that cover?"

Bob shrugged again.

"Gurnee Silver?" Dee guessed.

"And Arch Hayes," Bob said. He had clenched a fist without noticing it. Dee Kline's shrewd old eyes marked the hard bitter lines that had come on the younger man's face.

"Gurnee Silver's a mouthful fer any man. Any dozen men," Dee said slowly. "If all the stories that are floatin' around about him are true, he's used to comin' out on top. He's got money to throw away. He can hire men killed an' buy men's souls if he's got use fer that kind of trash. He never got where he is today by bluff an' talk. He's a wise old lobo, bub. He's fergot more'n you ever been able to pick up yet."

"He did it across the border," Bob said hotly.

"An' in Red Rock when he wanted an election," Dee reminded softly.

Bob stood up with a bleak grin. "Wrong, Dee. He paid his money an' got nothing. He didn't get a sheriff he can use. He got Dakota Canfield, an' there ain't enough money could be brought out o' Mexico to buy Dakota. He lost there an' he watched his son get whipped tonight."

Bob frowned. "I don't know what to make of that, Pop," he declared. "Silver never lifted a hand to help his boy. Had his gunmen right there an' didn't make a move. Pulled his daughter away when she wanted to protect her brother. Made her stand back, an' stood back himself and gave me leave to tromp that Tony Silver like young Silver was going to tromp me."

"Huh?" said Dee, standing up. "Yuh don't say? So the old man done that, did he? Sounds more like him. He's a fighter. Always was, from what I've heerd." He shook his head. "Go slow with him, Bob. He'll surprise yuh when yuh ain't lookin' for it. An' as fer catchin' Dakota tonight, yuh won't have much luck. Get out yore bedroll an' bunk here tonight. Yuh can trail him tomorrow an' mebbeso ketch him."

"You been leadin' up to this all along," Bob guessed.

Dee chuckled. "It's the smart thing to do—an' I raised yuh to be smart. Yore bunk's waitin', son, an' Wong'll have breakfast as usual. A man can ride an' think an' fight a heap better on a full belly."

VII.

Dee was right as usual. Bob Brule *was* a better man for the night's sleep, the ham and eggs, coffee, fried potatoes and cold pie. Better for the wrinkled grinning face of old Wong padding around the table and the joshing of Slim Jim, Rawhide, One-eye and Danny Jones who made excuses to linger around the saddle shed while Bob tied a light trail pack on a spare horse.

"Just my luck I hightailed out o' town before the fun started," Slim Jim complained. "Young Silver, huh? I'd 'a' give a month's pay to seen it."

"I'd 'a' give a month's pay not to've been in it, by the looks of that face," Rawhide drawled.

If any of them had heard Dakota and Dee Kline in the night, they gave no hint. Bob left the telling to Dee if he saw fit, and stopped only for a word with Dee back of the house before he rode off.

"The older yuh git," said Dee, squinting against the slanting blaze of the early sun, "the more yuh learn that movin' easy gits yuh there fastest, bub. Talk that's said can't be took back. A young hothead can git hisself in over his ears before he figgers how to wade out. Dakota ain't no man's fool when he's thinkin' straight—an' yuh oughta know about Gurnee Silver by now. Enough anyways. Wisht I could help yuh more, but it's yore game from now on."

"Thanks, Pop," Bob said. "You've helped. You always did help."

Dee Kline, leathery tough little cowman from white hair to scuffed riding boots, was smiling as he shifted into Spanish. *"Con Dios, hijo*—go with God, son," Dee said in the Mexican parting that could mean much. There was brightness in his wise old eyes, pride and concern that he would only hint at in Spanish.

"Padre mi, gracias," Bob said as he rode off, and his eyes were bright, too, and near to dampness as Dee's had been.

They'd been closer in that moment than ever before. Dee was satisfied with the boy he'd raised, and concerned over what lay ahead. And yet it was Bob Brule's trouble, Bob Brule's fight—and Dee would wait to see what happened.

Gurnee Silver had been like that last night, Bob remembered. For the first time he wondered if he didn't understand what had been in Gurnee Silver's mind. A father's mind—with his son bloody and losing—but Tony Silver's trouble, Tony Silver's fight—and the old man standing back no matter what he wanted to do.

"Fair an' square as Dee himself," Bob muttered. "An' I'll bet he was hurt like Dee would've been. Hell! What kind o' hombre is that; square on one side an' crooked on the other?"

Dakota had ridden south. The tracks of horse and pack horse were there on the dusty wagon trail that led south and angled west five miles to the Salt Canyon crossing, two hundred feet down and two hundred up on the other side.

And there the tracks left the western running ranch trail and struck across the open range toward the malpai belt of raw gullied greasewood ridges that broke finally on the high-wooded knobs of the Boracho hills.

Straight as a homing crow, Dakota had struck

across the malpai in the blackness of the night, traveling fast.

"Knew where he was going an' in a hell of a hurry to get there," Bob muttered as the sun lifted brassy and hot in the clear blue sky.

It was past noon by the time Bob crossed the malpai. His canteen of water was almost gone. Behind him heat waves shimmered over the raw, gouged ridges that fell away to the lower country. He was at the first brush and stunted trees of the Boracho hills. Ahead of him were wooded ridges and brushy draws. East, this broken higher country rose to the steep forested slopes of the Oro Mountains. West in the purple distance were the high mesas and higher slopes of the Paloma Mountains, the canyons and valleys that sloped southward down to the border. To the southwest was the great grassy trough of the Big Chipaya Draw.

And in the east and northeast and south, from the high grazing of the Oro peaks to the northern grass of the Big Chipaya Draw were the lands that Gurnee Silver had gathered under title of his La Plata Land & Cattle Co.

The big ranchhouse was to the east, where the cold foaming waters of Oro Creek came rushing down out of the mountains and a man could stand and look out over an empire of land that broke only against the purple Palomas bounding the western horizon. South in the misty distance there was no higher land to cut one off from Old Mexico, where the roots of Gurnee Silver still struck deep.

To the west and to the south were those lands of Tully Williams, Bide Miller, Ed Vance, Two-bit Johnson, and other smaller ranchers that were being rustled and hazed until they gave up and sold out to Gurnee Silver.

Twice in those first Boracho Hills Bob lost the trail, dismounted and searched it out. Half an hour in from the edge of the malpai, in a sheltered draw screened by fragrant pines and cedars, he found old Dakota's brief dry camp. No fire, no scraps of food, only sign where the horses had been staked out, and a step away the pressed grasses where Dakota's body had stretched.

The blaze of the sun, white, bright and hot in these first hours after midday, struck back like fire fragments from the base of a big boulder on the side of the draw.

Dakota had hurled a whiskey bottle at the boulder. The pieces had scattered in the short, curly grass. You could guess Dakota's anger when he hurled the bottle. Drunk again, perhaps, after the bitter election day and long, hard night of riding, of brooding on the past and empty future.

From this high country a man could look back almost to Red Rock—back almost across thirty years that had faltered and gone. In the south, if a man kept riding, was the border, strange country, strange people, oblivion for a man riding out of the past into the last gray dull years of his life.

Bob was sober as he rode on faster along that scant, almost invisible trail. It was as if he had dealt old Dakota a mortal blow and the bitter, beaten victim was slipping away from him, vanishing into the purple distance where nothing could be done to mend the wrong.

Once, far to the left, Bob thought he heard a gunshot. But when he reined up and held the pack horse still, only the hot brooding afternoon, the throbbing shrill of locusts was about him. The trail went straight ahead. Minutes later he rode on. He wanted Dakota Canfield, not one of Gurnee Silver's riders on La Plata land.

Two miles beyond, his horse snorted, threw up its head. Bob saw the man almost in the same moment, at the foot of a slope just ahead.

He was sitting at the base of a pine, tied there to the tree, wrists tied behind, arms and torso bound securely to the tree, and turns of a rawhide string holding a balled gag inside his mouth. Helpless if a man ever was—and it didn't need the gray hat pulled crookedly on the head to tell Bob this was the dusty, disheveled figure of Arch Hayes, the Red Rock lawyer.

Hayes made choked, furious sounds behind the gag as Bob dismounted.

"Take it easy," Bob recommended. "I'm here and what you're tryin' to say don't make sense past that gag, anyway."

Sign was here for a quick glance to read. The trampled print of horses, the marks of feet that had moved around before Dakota rode away. Bob cut the rawhide strings, fished out the soggy wad of handkerchief that had held Hayes mute.

"You didn't shoot first or he'd have killed you," Bob guessed. "He wasn't hunting you, his trail has come too fast and straight. But you've come a long ways since last night in Red Rock, Hayes. A long ways to be out here on La Plata range for Dakota to cut your sign. How come?"

The lawyer was choking, gagged with the stiffness in his mouth and throat. At last, thickly, huskily, his fury began to spout.

"Cut me loose! I'll kill him! I'll have him hunted down and dragged like he dragged me! Get me on my feet, Brule!"

Hayes' lips were still swollen from the blow that had bruised Bob's fist the night before. Despite the hoarse wild fury of the man, his eyes were still cold and calculating. His suit was cluttered with dust and dirt, torn across the shoulder, and the side of his face was bruised. His horse was gone, the gun holster under his coat empty.

Bob stood considering as he rolled tobacco in a paper. "Dragged you, did he? You look it. An' that's a funny thing for an old whiskey soak like Canfield to be doing. He lived a long time in Red Rock without draggin' a man."

Bide Miller had been shot out of the saddle and left for dead.

He twisted the cigarette end, lighted it, inhaled.

"Last night it was me you was a hairline from killin'," he said thoughtfully. "Now it's Canfield. There ain't a rattler in a week's ride of here that moves as crooked as you do, Hayes. I'd like to drag you at the end of a rope myself. You wasn't left here to make Canfield feel happy. You wasn't riding out here to take the air. Can you think fast enough, Hayes, to make me want to turn you loose?"

The wild fury was still there; but Hayes had it choked back now. His eyes said one thing—cold murder!—and his bruised stiff mouth said another, irritably.

"Don't be a fool, Brule! I was riding out here looking for Tony Silver. I missed him in Red Rock last night and missed him at the ranchhouse today. There's a matter of business I must see him about. I'm the Silvers' lawyer, you know."

"Last night you made that plain," Bob nodded, watching the restless lift of his horse's ears and listening to the strident song of the locusts.

There was something here in the brooding heat and loneliness that was as slippery and elusive as Arch Hayes himself. Danger. Warning to a man who followed old Dakota's trail.

Arch Hayes could well be telling the truth. He *was* the La Plata lawyer. That gunshot Bob had heard was proof others —one man at least—was in this part of the La Plata range.

But there was Canfield—old Dakota Canfield—as a boy and man had known him. That fiercely proud old husk of a brave and great sheriff. Dakota had tied Arch Hayes to stay at the foot of the slender pine until freed. Dakota had gagged him so there'd be no calling for help. Hayes or any man could well die like this unless the man who'd tied him came back. Then again Dakota had pushed Hayes' hat down firmly to keep off the sun.

"Sometimes you drag a man to make him talk," Bob said thoughtfully. "An' you leave him like this until you get back to take him along. I reckon Dakota aimed to come back this way. What would it be he found out from you that made him ride on alone?"

Arch Hayes sat rigidly there on the scuffed and tumbled pine needles. His hat was crushed awkwardly over his forehead, his eyes were dark coals. He might have been arguing his own law case with a black and bitter intensity.

"You're the next sheriff, Brule. Canfield is out of his head. Blamed me on sight for costing him the election. Roped and dragged me to try to force me to admit what he suspected. Drew a gun on me and threatened to kill me. He took my gun, left me like this. To die, I tell you! A bullet wouldn't do!" he cried passionately. "Without water and without food for as long as I could last, was what he said as he rode off! No matter what you think, you're the gainer out of all this, Brule. I don't know what brought you here, following Canfield, but get me to Tony Silver and you'll be cashing profit from it for years to come. No matter what happened between you and Silver last night, he's a

man who'll meet you more than halfway if you'll let him."

"Damn the Silvers, young and old!" Bob said with the edge of his bitterness. "They're no better than you—an' you got a slight idea what I think o' you. Dakota's the sheriff. He put you here. I'll leave you here for him, without the gag."

Bob pinched out the end of his cigarette before dropping it on the pine needles. Abruptly he changed his mind.

"No, by damn, I'll take you along on the pack horse! We'll find Dakota an' have it out. This is better luck than I expected."

He should have been watching his horse. Those ears would have been warning. The strident locusts were drowning minor sounds and the carpet of soft needles under the pines made a quiet footing. Arch Hayes must have known while he was talking, must have seen her coming.

She was speaking before Bob knew she was there! "Don't move!" she said. "I'll shoot!"

VIII.

Rifle was in his saddle boot, hand gun in his holster. She was at his back. The clear scorn in her order came through the shimmering heat and song of the locusts with the same whiplike cut of last night when she had darted in front of her brother.

Bob moved, to turn his head. She sat there on a small slim mare, a horse to draw the eye, cream and white, with a snowy white tail. A horse to draw the eye and a girl to hold the eye.

Judith Silver—Spanish and Yankee. Blue eyes challenging and her young face lovely behind its angry purpose. She was guiding the horse by the touch of her small knees. The rifle that covered Bob was steady in expert hands.

"This," Bob said evenly, "isn't business for a woman, either."

"Where's Tony?" Hayes called thickly to her.

"They cut over to the south." The pressure of her knee sent the mare slowly forward, circling out a little. "They're not needed," she said coldly. "I can handle this."

"Cut this rope and get me up from here," Hayes urged her thickly.

"The sheriff tied him there," Bob warned. "The law's holding him, ma'am. Better stay out of this."

"I heard you threatening him," she said coldly. "I heard him tell you why he was left like this. To die, perhaps. Last night I saw how cruel you could be to a helpless man. To my own brother. We're not in Red Rock now. We're on Gurnee Silver's land."

"Silver's land, Silver's law?" Bob said, smiling thinly. "But you're not dealing with Mexican *pelados* now, ma'am."

His words brought an angry flush to her face.

"I'd respect a *pelado!*" she said scornfully. "Move away from him! Keep away from your horse!"

"Purty," Bob said, regarding her admiringly. "Stubborn an' reckless. You wouldn't shoot me, ma'am, to get this crooked lawyer away from the law?"

She shot. No warning in the angry flush of her face; a slight drop of the rifle muzzle, the blasting report, dirt and grass erupting around his foot. A hammer blow on his foot that staggered him and left the leg wrenched and tingling.

His anger was a red mist for a moment. She'd shot him! Cold-bloodedly, arrogantly, like a Silver, she'd shot him. Then he found by the ungainly way he stood that she'd only shot the heel off his boot.

"Will you get away from him?" she demanded. Her voice shook slightly. The flush had left her face. She was pale, taut, ready to shoot again.

Bob's voice shook, too, with the helpless anger that had all but blinded him for a moment.

"You little fool! That might have smashed my foot! Might have crippled me for life! You tried to hide your brother behind your skirts an' now you do this because you know you're a woman an' safe! I can't shoot you, can't risk hurting you! Take him! He's as crooked as your menfolks!"

He turned his back on her, walked away a dozen steps, and looked away while he heard her get down in silence and free Arch Hayes. Her words to the lawyer were flat and without emotion.

"They'll be here if they heard the shot. We'd better wait for them."

Hayes was smoothly triumphant.

"Let me have the rifle, Miss Judith. Brule's dangerous and tricky. I'll watch him while you find Tony. You're very brave, but you mustn't take any more risk."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"Keep him covered with that rifle while I get his gun," Arch Hayes said hurriedly.

Bob turned. Hayes was starting toward him. Judith Silver was holding the rifle ready.

"Get back, Hayes!" Bob warned. "She can shoot like the devil's sister, but I'll get you first."

Hayes stopped. His cold eyes still held murder, but he took a backward step, shrugging.

"I'll take his horse and look for Tony," he said to the girl. "He won't hurt you."

"Don't take my horse either," Bob said softly.

"Take my horse and find Tony," Judith Silver told Hayes. "He and father and some of the men are off to the south there somewhere. They can't be far."

"I'll get them," Hayes said hurriedly. "Just hold Brule here until I see Tony."

He rode hard away from them. Bob rolled a cigarette and lighted it. The rifle was steady in Judith's hands. She was pale, angry again as Bob smoked and stared at her.

"I wish I *were* a man!" she burst out. "I'd give you your chance!"

"What kind of a chance?" Bob asked her slowly. "The chance Gurnee Silver gave me when he bought votes to have me elected, so I'd wear his bridle and bit as sheriff? Making me crooked without my knowledge? The chance he's giving the small ranchers around his land that he's forcing to sell out to him or go broke from rustling and crooked work?"

"You're lying!"

Bob turned his back on her and walked to his horse.

"Don't get on that horse!" she called.

Bob caught the reins, swung into the saddle and rode away from her without looking back. For tense seconds he expected her to shoot. When she did not he put the horse into a gallop on the sign Dakota Canfield had left.

He'd gambled that she wouldn't shoot. All her reckless, angry threat had wavered after that one shot at his foot. Regret, something very close to shame, had come like a shadow in her blue eyes.

He wasn't worried about her being stranded. His pack horse was there for her to ride. Hayes would be back with her father and brother. And somewhere ahead in these Boracho Hills old Dakota Canfield was riding on business that touched Arch Hayes and Gurnee Silver. You could be certain Dakota hadn't tied the lawyer to the pine tree because of the election. Canfield hadn't left a man helpless to hunger and thirst because of a personal grudge.

The trail showed fast riding. Dakota's pack horse suddenly came into view, tied some miles from where Arch Hayes had been left. More proof that Dakota meant to head back this way, and wanted to ride fast and unhampered.

The Boracho Hills broke down into the lower country. Southwest was the rim of the Big Chipaya Draw. Miles ahead the badlands jutted in from the north. Through here was the fringe of Gurnee Silver's land. Bob realized suddenly that Tully Williams must have owned this land. Bide Miller's ranch lay ahead and to the south, running far out into the Big Chipaya Draw. Dakota's trail was swinging north toward the badlands. And that could mean anything.

Bob's horse pricked inquiring ears. Warily Bob reined up. The locusts were behind. Only the hard breathing of the horse broke the hot silence.

The ears pricked again. Bob heard it then—gunshots, so far in the southwest that they were mere whispers of sound.

Dakota had not been headed that way, unless he'd turned. But trouble must mean Dakota! The whispering shots had stopped. A man couldn't be sure of the exact direction. But the horse was looking to the southwest. Bob made the best guess he could and rode that way.

He reached Sand Creek, a trickle crawling over the sandy creek bottom, looping, wandering through the low hills, and he followed the creek down. All riders in this part of the range would stop along the creek for water.

Then suddenly a bend in the creek showed a saddled horse ahead. Rifle ready for trouble, Bob looked around for the rider. Head up, the horse stood there, looking at him. Reins hung frm the saddlehorn, rifle was gone from the saddle scabbard.

The horse moved, limping badly, and Bob rode slowly forward. The horse retreated a few steps and waited. It was a gray horse, and as he rode close, Bob marked a raw furrow, drying blood high up on the left shoulder.

Speaking soothingly, he caught the reins. The sand held tracks where the horse had come to the water, had wondered back to the first grass. No boot marks were visible. The horse was branded Bar W. Bide Miller's brand!

Bob swore softly. "Shot out o' the saddle!" he said aloud.

A man might quarter these brushy draws and hills for days without finding a body, unless the buzzards gathered. Leading the wounded horse, Bob began to puzzle out the backtrail.

The horse couldn't have come far. Those whispering shots hadn't been so long ago. He backtrailed to the point where the horse had headed straight for the water. Beyond that point the tracks wandered, finally started to bear out in a vast circle, where the horse had been running.

Then Bob sighted a stumbling figure that fell a moment later, staggered up, stood staring toward him. It was Bide Miller, hatless, coatless, face drawn with pain, a six-gun in his hand.

IX.

Bide was standing like a drunken man when Bob galloped up, swung down and demanded: "Who did it? What happened?"

Bide's scalp was torn above the hairline. Blood had run down into his eyes, streaked his face. Coat and vest were gone, shirt was bloody beside the heart. Pants were bloody between hip and knee, and the bullet hole there was visible.

Bide looked like a dying man. His voice was a hoarse croak, but there was no mistaking the sneer on his blood-smeared face.

"What difference does it make what happened, you damn double-crosser? You knowed what we was up against—an' you sold us out! Maybe you're workin'—" His knees buckled.

Bob caught him, eased him down to the ground. "Save your cussin' until later, Bide. Did you see Dakota Canfield?"

Panting, Bide sat there. Lips free from blood indicated that the side wound probably hadn't torn his lungs.

"Ain't seen no one but rustlers takin' my best cows," he mumbled. "Forty Rod an' I rode out along the fences. They jumped us. Killed Forty Rod. I got one before they shot me out o' the saddle. I ain't seen yore damned sheriff! He's drunk an' lost out here?"

Bob hunkered down and met Bide's tortured scorn bluntly. "I don't know what Dakota's doin' out here. I'm trailing him. He left Red Rock last night before I told him he was elected." Bob jerked a thumb back at the Boracho Hills. "I found Arch Hayes back there, where Dakota had tied him to a pine tree an' gone on. Last night Arch Hayes told me he had used Silver's money to buy me votes. They wanted an easy sheriff to handle. Dakota would have won an honest election. That's why I stepped out, Bide; why I'm lookin' for Dakota."

A spasm of pain crossed Bide's face; and when the spasm passed, his scorn was gone.

"Gurnee Silver again!" Bide gasped thickly. "He's got me! He'll git my land now! Crooked votes or honest votes, you're the man for sheriff, Bob! Canfield didn't help Forty Rod an' me! He's a wore-out whiskey guzzler who don't give a damn what happens on Red Rock range! Damn, if I could ride after them!"

"Could you make it home if I put you in the saddle?"

"Doubt it," Bide confessed. "Might if I was tied on. My horse'd git me there if he was started right." Bide cursed huskily. "They're runnin' my cows to Horse-thief Pool. I hit my head on a rock an' lay there like I was dead. They thought I was dead an' stood talkin' by me a minute. I just had sense enough to hear 'em."

"Horse-thief Pool," Bob said, glancing toward the north.

Bide nodded.

"Lemme see them wounds," Bob said quickly. "How's your lungs?"

"Busted a rib an' chewed up some meat on my side. The leg is the bad one."

"Lie down!"

Bide gasped with relief as he obeyed. Under the blood-matted shirt Bob found a little blood still oozing. But the splintered rib was the main damage there. It would be hard for a man to ride with that rib, but it could be done if he was gutty enough.

The leg was worse, a small hole going in, a much larger one coming out. Bone and arteries seemed to have escaped. The ooze of blood was greater here on the leg. Bob swore under his breath at the lack of cloth for a bandage, solved it by jerking off his coat and shirt and slicing the shirt into strips with his knife.

He put a cloth pad over each wound opening

"Got 'em!" Dakota yelled. But the cliff swarmed with men, and Bob knew he and Dakota were hemmed in.

in the leg, bandaged them tightly. He needed more cloth, and got it by cutting up his coat.

"Ain't no use to hang all yore clothes on me," mumbled Bide.

"You do the groanin'; I'll do the tying," Bob retorted.

Bide grinned crookedly. "You oughta be a doctor. Maybe I can't make it home. You better side me."

"You've got too damned much argument for a dying man," Bob said. "It ain't gettin' home that's worryin' you. It's what'll happen to me at Horse-thief Pool."

"You ain't the man for it," Bide argued weakly. "Keep you from gettin' killed today an' maybe you'll grow into a half-fair sheriff."

Bob tied the last knot and spoke with finality.

"Climb up on that horse an' I'll get you out o' my way. Damn glad to get rid of you, too."

"No more than I'll be to see the last of you," Bide groaned as Bob helped him up.

They understood one another now. Talk wouldn't change the grim business that lay ahead. Bide would have to take his chances and shift for himself while Bob Brule rode off into worse trouble.

They were swearing, hoorawing one another as Bob boosted Bide on the lame horse, took the saddle rope and lashed Bide on.

"If you get sleepy and keel over for a nap, lay forward," Bob advised.

Bide's blood-crusted face creased in a mirthless grin.

"If I hang head down, I have nightmares," he said. "I never did like nightmares. Can't eat breakfast after a bad one. Guess I'll try to stay right side up."

"A glutton like you would see it that way," Bob said rudely. "I guess this is the best I can do. I'll roll you a cigarette before you start."

Bide eyed Bob's belt gun hungrily. "I'd buy yore gun, only you'll need it," he said. "Haven't got a derringer tucked away anywhere, have you? Bad nightmares make me want to start shootin'."

"You ain't gonna hang head down under that horse and blow your brains out with my gun," Bob said gruffly as he handed up a cigarette and match. "Not havin' a gun might make you stay head up and ridin'." He swung into his saddle. "Everything straight?" he asked.

"Plenty straight," Bide replied, and his voice turned extra husky. "Good luck, feller."

"Same to you," Bob said.

They parted like that. Briefly, almost gruffly. Bide might slip down under the horse and be kicked and dragged to death before he reached help. Bob Brule might meet killer guns and be a corpse before sunset.

X.

Bob might have recognized Horse-thief Pool without Bide's telling him. In the malpai belt, north of the Big Chipaya Draw, Horse-thief Pool was hidden away in a sullen canyon cut by some ancient stream long vanished.

You could pass within a stone's throw of the canyon and never know it was there. You could ride fast through the canyon and miss Horse-thief Pool if rains had washed away sign leading into the side pocket where a shallow pool of water lay under an overhang of black rock cliff.

But if you knew the canyon, you could travel west through the badlands without cutting the skyline. You could water stolen horses and cattle at the pool and make a quick drive for the western mountains without showing dust to any inquiring eyes sweeping the horizon.

Bob found the brush-bounded meadow where the gunmen had jumped Bide and Forty Rod. There in the grass Forty Rod lay, arms crossed over his chest as Bide had left him. Bide's coat and vest were nearby. Bob put on the coat and felt better with the covering.

Beyond the meadow the tracks of Bide's cattle angled north. They'd not be traveling too fast. A long night lay ahead. Bob bore farther to the east, swinging wide of the gunmen driving Bide's cattle.

Bob had ridden hard and fast already today and it was with reluctance that he pushed the horse harder. He rode with rifle out and ready, eyes searching the broken country.

He might have been alone in all this vast stretch of back range. Once a small bunch of cattle broke back into the brush. Bob stopped, made sure he had not run into Bide's stolen cows, and rode on.

His horse was tiring fast when the last brush and grass gave way to lava ridges, rock outcrops, raw areas of gravelly soil that held little but cactus and scanty tufts of grass.

Then, without warning, the canyon dropped away before him. Two hundred feet deep, five hundred wide, rocky sides sheer in spots, steep slopes of broken tumbled rocks in other places. Bob skirted the edge, found a descending path, rode down, turned west.

Once every year or so a cloudburst made the canyon floor a raging torrent, but in this weather the sands were hot and dry. On the steep rocky sides grew crooked cane cactus, long whiplike stalks of Spanish wife beaters, patches of prickly pear, and occasional gnarled and scattered bushes. When the shod hoofs struck rock the sound rang sharply. Bob looked for fresh trail sign and found none.

Dakota had not come this way nor had cattle passed since the last big rain.

Bob took each turn warily, scrutinized the bottom of each descending trail. Horse-thief Pool was not far ahead now. Frowning, he wondered what had happened to Dakota.

The last quarter of a mile Bob rode with rifle cocked, finger on the trigger, eyes searching the rocks ahead, the canyon walls and rimrock above.

Horse-thief Pool lay in a rocky side pocket that

had sloping walls of great riven and tumbled rocks down which a goat might come, but no horse nor cow.

Cattle and horse sign led into the side pocket that held the pool, all of it old. Bob rode into the frowning side pocket, certain that he was the first rider here this day.

The still green-blue water of the pool lay under a black, overhanging rock wall near the back of the pocket. Bob dismounted and let the horse eagerly plunge his muzzle into the water.

An old tin can rested on a rock beside the pool. Bob was drinking when a cold, clipped order struck him right.

"Stand still! What'n hell yuh doin' here?"

Hands level with his shoulders, Bob turned his head toward the voice.

Back beyond the wall of overhanging rock was the steep back of the pocket where great rocks were cluttered, piled and poised haphazardly to the rimrock high above. Some thirty feet up there, between two huge rocks, a rifle barrel moved enough to be visible. Bob made out a face peering over the rifle sights, all but hidden in the narrow space between the rocks.

"Canfield!" Bob exclaimed with relief.

Dakota's hard, cold voice came back. "That's right, damn yuh! Who yuh aimin' to see here?"

"I've been looking for you. Thought I'd missed you when I didn't see horse tracks out there in the canyon."

"Yo're a liar!" Dakota said grimly. "No one knowed I'd be here. What kind o' crooked play're yuh tryin', Brule? Where's yore shirt? Ain't that blood on the shoulder there?"

Bob put the water can back on the rock.

"Bide Miller's coat, Dakota. I used my shirt and coat to tie Bide's wounds. He an' Forty Rod met rustlers moving their beef. Forty Rod's dead. Bide was shot up an' left for dead. Two rustlers are headin' toward this water with the stock. Traveling to the Palomas tonight, I guess."

"Yuh alone?" Dakota asked sharply.

"Yes."

"Playin' sheriff already, huh?" Dakota said with huge contempt. "Bustin' in here like a damn fool, leavin' tracks! Yuh ain't got as much sense as I thought yuh had!"

"I swung wide and rode fast to get ahead of Bide's cattle," Bob said. "Pull in your horns, Dakota. I thought I'd find you here."

"Brule," said Dakota grimly, "yo're lyin'. I'm itchin' fer an excuse to shoot. Shuck out the truth before I git riled."

"You're a stubborn old coot," Bob said with forced calm. "Last night I followed you out of Red Rock. I cut your trail at Dee Kline's and followed you today until I came on Arch Hayes. I'm bettin' Hayes didn't give me the straight of why you tied him. It don't matter. Gurnee Silver's daughter rode up, lined her rifle on me and let Hayes take her horse to get Silver and his men. I rode away from her and came after you fast. I found Bide Miller on the way. Did Hayes tell you I didn't know the election was crooked until I walked out of Redfield's bar last night and Hayes told me? Did he tell you I had a fist fight in Red Rock last night with Tony Silver? Did he tell you a bunch of the men who voted for me run me out of Red Rock last night and I ain't wanted back there?"

"I ain't surprised!" Dakota snapped. "You oughta been run out long ago, yuh yellow-livered young squirt! Yo're here now an' playin' sheriff! Stay here and git the man Hayes admitted he was ridin' to meet. Git them rustlers yo're prattlin' about. I'm pullin' out now an' leavin' it to yuh."

Dakota stood up, worn old hat pulled low over his seamed, scowling face. Bob grinned thinly at him.

"When I heard crooked votes had elected me, I quit," Bob declared. "That's why I got run out of Red Rock. Men who had an idea they needed a new sheriff to stop Gurnee Silver's hog-trough ways of gettin' new land figured I'd double-crossed them. You got the election, Dakota. You're the next sheriff. Killers an' rustlers are headin' this way. Git 'em, you stubborn old mule, or I'll ride back to Red Rock and take your office, crooked or honest!"

Dakota stood behind the big rocks for a long moment. Bob thought he saw the old shoulders straightening a little. Dakota spoke, and a new ring was in his voice.

"So yo're admittin' the honest votes elected me? Yo're steppin' out?"

"Dee Kline'll tell you."

"Get the hell out o' here, then!" Dakota said. "I'll handle this!"

No whiskey about old Dakota Canfield now. He stood taller there among the rocks. A changed man. A different man. As Bob remembered him—the old fighting sheriff that had cleaned up the Red Rock country long years ago.

"I'll help you," Bob offered.

"I don't need no help to get a coupla dirty rustlin' gunmen!" Dakota rasped. "Yuh'll just be in my way!"

Relief was in Bob's grin. No need to wonder what kind of a sheriff Dakota Canfield would make now. No need to wonder whether he, Bob Brule, had done right by Bide Miller and his friends in backing out of the sheriff's office. Dakota was all the sheriff Red Rock would need.

"It'd help if I was made a deputy," he suggested.

"I don't need no deputy on this, Brule. I'll bring 'em in an' then go for Arch Hayes."

"You're the boss," Bob said, and the ghost of a smile was on his face as he picked up the rifle.

Maybe Dakota wouldn't admit it, not even to himself, but with this business of the rustlers he would wipe out the recent years, the bitterness of the election, by returning to Red Rock once more with prisoners caught lone-handed.

"Good luck," Bob said, and meant it.

He looked up to the rimrock as he said that—and saw against the skyline a man sighting a rifle down.

"Look out!" Bob yelled, lunging to the side.

A thin sharp report rapped through his warning. Wasplike, the bullet screamed by him and slapped loudly against the placid pool. Bob whipped back an answering shot.

And a second man, a third and fourth appeared up there on the rimrock.

Dakota's rifle barked.

"Git to cover, Brule!" the old sheriff shouted.

XI.

Bob already was diving for the nearest big rock. And the angry staccato roll of sudden gunfire beat down into the rock-walled pocket. Lead shrilled close, slapped, smacked against water and rock.

Dakota's rifle barked again. "Got one!"

Bob risked death to look. It was like some great ungainly bird taking flight from the rimrock across the pocket. The drop was sheer and far to the first tumbled rocks at that point. The man was plain against the skyline as he plunged into space, arms waving, body twisting.

A rifle fell away from him, fell faster, streaking down. The body followed. A wild, horrible cry rang through the pocket.

Bob looked away as the rifle struck clattering on the rocks. He heard the soggy impact that followed.

Gunfire had stopped. Then like a vicious retort, a snapping shot knocked rock chips into Bob's face, ricocheted away in a screaming buzz.

Other guns opened up. Men had dropped to cover. A second bullet knocked sand against Bob's leg. He was half exposed. Those high gunmen could see most spots where a man might try to hide.

Bob wriggled desperately around the rock, scrambled up the steep slope to a huge boulder that gave better protection.

"Did you say two rustlers?" Dakota's voice coolly questioned. "They's seven at least, countin' the one I pulled down."

"Bide Miller saw only two."

"Did yuh say Arch Hayes went to find Silver?"

"Yes."

Dakota swore in harsh anger. "Then that's Silver's men up there! Maybe Silver hisself helping to pot shoot us! The dirty border thief!"

Bob saw head and shoulders of a man taking aim down at them, whipped a shot at the spot, saw the man draw back. He couldn't tell whether he'd hit him.

Dakota swore again.

"Plumb through my hat! Me waitin' like an old fool down here in a trap like this!"

The men on the rimrock were keeping down out of sight. Bob saw a bush sprout magically on the edge. He marked the spot.

Dakota was out of sight higher up among the rocks. His rifle spoke. He was muttering aloud. His voice lifted to Bob.

"I oughta brought Arch Hayes along. Had an idea he was lying about meeting one man here. He knowed Silver was around. But he whined an' bellered so when I drug him a leetle to make him talk, I figgered he didn't have guts to lie an' scheme to my face. I thought I'd just climb down here from above an' ketch whoever Hayes was aimin' to meet here at the pool. An' now look at me!"

Bob saw a slight movement at the new bush up there on the rimrock. He lined sights fast and shot. The bush jerked over—but no man appeared. A screaming bullet tore a furrow in Bob's shoulder before he could get behind cover again.

Now and then they could hear voices shouting up there on the rimrock. The men were moving around the pocket for vantage points where they could sight on the men below.

Dakota swore loudly again. "That'n' took meat out o' my back! Some misguided son is bouncin' lead off the rock behind me! Are yuh fixed good, Brule?"

"Somebody's shooting mighty close!" Bob admitted.

"See them three big rocks under the overhang back of the pool?" Dakota asked. "Try to make it there!"

Bob made a plunging run up the steep slope. Men shouted on the rimrock. Every gun up there

opened fire. Screaming lead ricocheted off the rocks all about him.

Dakota was scrambling for the same three rocks. Bob slipped; and as he came up there was a cold slamming jar in the calf of his left leg. Another bullet grazed his side. Rock chips spattered into his face. Gasping, he scrambled behind the three rocks.

Dakota was already crouching there. His face was bleeding, but his hand steady as he wrapped a bandanna around his left forearm.

"Chunk o' rock gashed my face. Got a hole in my arm," he said coolly. "How yuh makin' out?"

"One in the leg," Bob replied, looking up at the black rock cliff that bulged out slightly above their heads. "They can't get over us anyway," he said. "They were working around to try it."

"Got us trapped," Dakota grumbled. "Serves me right for lettin' it happen. But I wasn't figgerin' Gurnee Silver an' his gunmen."

Bob looked down the slope to the blue-green pool, uneasy now as lead and rock chips struck the water. Between the three big rocks he could see the skyline where guns searched for them. Ignoring the wounded leg, Bob peered intently, and threw a quick shot at a movement up there.

"Made him jump anyway," he grinned, reaching for fresh cartridges.

He looked over to find Dakota studying him. The old man grunted, started reloading, too.

"We'll git more of 'em yet," Dakota said, and looked up at the bulging cliff above as lead ricocheted down beside him. He snorted. "Might 'a' knowed some dirty son'd figure out the one way to get at us here. Bouncin' lead off the rock up there is as good as shootin' around a corner at us!"

The guns above them went silent again. Dakota looked at Bob as a shout rang out.

"Brule! Canfield! Do you hear me?"

"That," said Bob, scowling, "is Arch Hayes, or I'm a liar!"

"You ain't a liar," Dakota grunted. He cupped his hands and replied, "Ain't Gurnee Silver man enough tuh speak for hisself?"

Arch Hayes was silent for a moment, and then his reply floated down.

"Silver isn't here. Come out with your hands up and we'll take you back to Red Rock to stand trial for tying me up! Or let you ride out of these parts and keep going! You haven't got a chance down there!"

Dakota spat and answered harshly. "Yuh opened fire on the law, Hayes! I'll outlaw yuh and Gurnee Silver an' every dirty, gun-totin' rascal I git up there!"

The guns opened fire again. The screaming spatter of lead was all about the two men. Dakota hunched his shoulders as lead particles struck his back.

Bob looked down the rocky slope.

"A man might wade through the back of the pool, Dakota, and make a break out into the canyon," he suggested.

"Yore hoss lit out," Dakota retorted. "We'd be two rabbits scuttlin' along the canyon while they hunted us from the top. We'll stick it out here to dark. Better tie yore leg. Blood's comin' through fast."

Dakota cocked his rifle, peered around one of the big rocks and scanned the skyline. Bob did the same. They both saw a movement up there. They fired in the same instant.

Dakota grinned crookedly. "One more. We're gittin' 'em down to our size—if they don't bounce enough lead in our necks to stop us before dark."

He reached for a plug of tobacco. "Come dark, if they're still up there, we'll make a bust out in the canyon an' git up there at 'em on even ground. There ain't time to git a posse before they scatter."

Bob nodded, and the faint smile passed again over his face.

Gone now was that baffled defeated look that had come like a tide of despair on Dakota's old face back there in Harmony Redfield's saloon. Alive or dead, the setting sun would find Dakota once more the hard-fighting sheriff Bob Brule had hero-worshiped as a boy.

The guns snarled down at them without ceasing. Now and then they shot back. More ricocheting lead wounded them both slightly.

Then for long moments the gunfire on the rimrock seemed to double. A man sprang into view. Dakota knocked him over with a fast shot.

"Tally one more," Dakota said calmly. A few moments later he scowled. "Reckon Hayes has got another tricky scheme up his sleeve?"

A last ragged burst of shots up there had died away. Brooding silence fell over the shadows gathering in the bottom of the pocket. And then above them a mighty bellow rang from rock to rock.

"Brule, are you down there?"

Eyes narrowing, Bob looked at Dakota. "Gurnee Silver!"

"Answer the dirty wolf!"

"All right, Silver. What do you want?"

"I'm coming to the edge!"

"Figures he's trickier than Hayes!" Dakota said savagely. "I'll bring him down shore as hell's full of cinders if he deals a wrong card!"

Gurnee Silver appeared on the rimrock. The setting sun struck bright and golden against his huge figure, broad shoulders, wide sombrero. The bellow of his voice rang down to them again.

"All clear up here now! We've got Hayes and the rest of these gunmen! Is Canfield there, too?"

"Yo're damned right he is!" Dakota yelled back. "An' got my sights on yuh, Silver! Yore smooth tricks won't work any better'n Hayes' talk!"

Silver's shout held sudden wrath. "Are you trying to say we've been shooting at you?"

"I'll show yuh when I ketch up with yuh!" Dakota promised harshly.

"Hold that gun!" Silver roared.

At the point where Silver stood, a man might get down with difficulty over and among the steep-piled rocks. And down he came, Gurnee Silver, big, muscular, agile despite his years. Down, down, without a gun in his hand, and not a trace of fear in his advance.

"By hell!" said Dakota. "Give him credit for bein' a man, anyway!"

They were standing now, rifles cocked and ready as they watched Gurnee Silver come to face them. He wore the same fine riding boots and costly suit of black broadcloth Bob Brule had seen him in last night, but they were powdered now with dust.

Face hard, mustache close to bristling, Silver dropped lightly behind the big rocks and faced them. And his voice was coldly challenging.

"It's me who told you what happened up there! Gurnee Silver told you!"

The hard, rough pride of the big man was like a fist in their faces. Bob gave it back with anger.

"Gurnee Silver! That's why we're looking for a trick! Why didn't you bring Arch Hayes to tell it, too?"

Dakota was a grizzled, bloody old man, who stood straight and watchful; and his words had a cold, quiet warning, strangely more dangerous than Gurnee Silver's bellow.

"I'm the Red Rock sheriff, Silver. Yore trick of gettin' crooked votes for Brule backfired. Brule quit when he found out. I cleaned up this Red Rock country once an' you dirtied it again. Dirtied it with the money an' the ways yuh picked up across the border; any trick that'd give yuh a strangle hold on this range like yuh got across the border."

"No!" Silver denied violently.

"Yuh've done the dirt. Yo're wearin' the brand!" Dakota said in the same chill tones. "Murder an' rustlin' has been done today. I've cleaned wolves off this range before, Silver. I'll clean yuh, too! There it is. Fill yore hand."

Watching warily, Bob saw the broad deep chest of Gurnee Silver lift with a great breath—and then relax as the fiery temper of the big man drained away.

Into Silver's bold blue eyes, as in the eyes of Judith Silver, came an expression close to regret.

"So it's true," he said heavily. "Everything my daughter told me Brule said to her. And the things Tony admitted he suspected were happening."

Gurnee Silver looked at them squarely. The hard bleakness was gone from his face.

"I turned most of this La Plata managing over to my son. Matters south of the border were taking all my time. I wanted land on this range, sure. All we could get. Tony hired this lawyer, Hayes, to help. We had the money. Hayes knew the country and the people.

"I've had to fight to keep on top down there across the border. Mostly I tried to fight fair. My son took all land that Hayes could get, paid fairly and asked no questions. I'd have stopped it if I'd known how Hayes was getting some of the land. He worked with my name, my money, to get the strangle hold you speak of, sheriff. A hold I didn't want."

Gurnee Silver gestured wearily. Regret had crept heavily into his voice.

"We were always strangers down there in Mexico. I decided to come back, sheriff. To make a home where we belonged. I wanted friends, neighbors like ourselves. Friends and neighbors like my folks had when I was young. All we had down there in Mexico couldn't make up for it—or the lack of it in the lives of my son and daughter."

Gurnee Silver made another futile gesture.

"Hayes didn't ride to find me this afternoon. He came this way fast. When I met my daughter and heard what had happened, and what young Brule here had charged me with, I got at once all the truth my son knew. Of votes bought and sold he denied knowledge. I believe him. We followed Brule's tracks, found this man Miller, heard his story, left a man with him and rode hard for here. We cleaned out those gunmen up there on the rimrock and are holding the ones that are alive, including Hayes. He'd been riding here to talk with them when you met him, sheriff. He made a break this way to warn them when Judith gave him her horse."

Gurnee Silver shrugged his broad shoulders and spoke almost sadly.

"I can't undo everything that's been done in my name. But I'll right what I can, no matter what it costs. Prisoners are waiting up there, sheriff. I'll be glad to have you stop for the night at our house, if you will."

Gurnee Silver cleared his throat.

"My daughter, Brule, will be wanting to apologize to you for a great mistake she made. She said so. And that," said Gurnee Silver, with another regretful gesture, "is all I can do, sheriff. The rest is up to you."

Dakota leaned his rifle against the rock and looked at Bob. "What about it, Brule?"

"Better stop tonight at the ranch, hadn't we?" Bob said quickly.

"Thought so," Dakota said dryly, as if he might have known Judith Silver himself. But nothing like that showed in his calm decision to the big man facing them bleakly. "Bob's got purty good judgment for a young deputy. We'll stop with you, neighbor, an' be obliged."

THE END.

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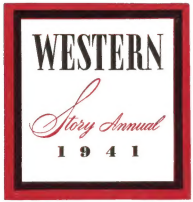

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